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BESTSELLER MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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A MERCURY MP PUBLICATION

HE MAN WHO DIDN'T FLY

By Margot Bennett

atal plane crash...a silent survivor

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NEW YORK TIMES

The DA's Reputation . . . . . JOSEPH R. MARSHALL
Nine Roses for the Commissar OSCAR SCHISGALL
Till Death Do Us Part . . . . . ROBERT BLOCH
A Small Favor . . . . . ARTHUR PORGES

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BESTSELLER MYSTERY MAGAZINE

January 1960 *Including* MERCURY MYSTERY MAGAZINE

THE MAN WHO DIDN'T FLY *Margot Bennett* 5

Four men had chartered the ill-fated plane whose flaming wreckage had been silently accepted by the sea. Logically enough, four men were missing. Not so logical was the fact that only three men had boarded the plane—one man had never even reached the airport. One of the four had mysteriously chosen to disappear, or had been chosen. The Saturday Review calls it a "real sparkler . . . bright, witty . . . cast excellent . . . good fun."

The D A's Reputation *Joseph R. Marshall* 111

I needed a reputation, and the old fool would give it to me.

Nine Roses for the Commissar *Oscar Schisgall* 117

Flowers for murder—a rare arrangement.

Till Death Do Us Part *Robert Bloch* 121

Carl was a mortician turned murderer—an "ideal" set up.

A Small Favor *Arthur Porges* 124

Franz had tired of the lies—his knife glinted in the moonlight.

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JOSEPH W. FERMAN, *Editor and Publisher* RUTH FERMAN, *Circulation Manager*

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Margot Bennett possesses the ability to combine sparkling characterization, wit, and suspense in a mystery novel. Witness the following, a story rich in all three and bristling with genuine excitement. It concerns a search for a man who has seemingly escaped death, but who instead plunges the authorities into an investigation of his disappearance—an exit as untimely and grimly final as death itself. Inspector Lewis untangles the accounts of the Wade family, the only ones who can give him the answer to his investigation of four men, three the victims of a plane crash, and a fourth—the man who didn't fly.

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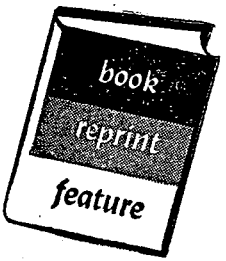
THE MAN WHO DIDN'T FLY

by MARGOT BENNETT



PROLOGUE

At eleven in the morning the airplane began its westward flight across England, shining like snow under the blue sky, losing its glitter in the thick, white clouds, passing, heard but unseen, over the Welsh hills. On the shore at Aberavon, children struggling wet into jerseys, parents snatching at animated papers, cramming sandwiches back into boxes, flinched as the plane flew too low over their heads; then watched with angry, admiring eyes as it lunged into the black clouds that pressed down on the black sea. No one saw the plane again, although there were reports of a fireball that had rolled, slower than lightning, down the sky to the sea. Rescue planes searched the Irish Channel, but they might as well have looked for Lycidas.

After the accident comes the casualty list; deaths must be docu-

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mented, and no man is allowed a death certificate without first dying for it.

The death of the pilot was as indisputable as the loss of the plane. The status of the passengers was more difficult to define. Neither friend, relative, enemy, insurance company, nor coroner was willing to admit that any one of the passengers was conclusively and legally dead. Four men had arranged to travel by the airplane, four had disappeared; only three men had arrived at the airport, only three passengers had entered the plane.

The man who didn't fly had been spared by chance or providence. He should have appeared, smiling uneasily, to describe how he had stopped to tie his shoelace and missed his bus. He was silent as though he had taken a bus to eternity. He was not only silent, he was invisible, and, worst of all for the authorities, he was any one of four people. He could be classified as the man who didn't fly, and he created the impossible situation of leaving three deaths to be shared out among four men.

INVESTIGATION

THE PATIENT INQUIRIES began, crackling and exploding around the Wades; splashing through Moira Ferguson's stupor; rubbing like sandpaper over the indifference of bus conductors and railway porters all the way from Furlong Deep to Brickford Airport; and tenderly nursing the facts that drooped like limp seedlings in the Fairway Arms.

The landlord was old. He had a disease of the liver that prevented him from working at anything but the study of racing forms. He spent most of his life in a back room making imaginary bets on a three-column system, and keeping accounts with the precision of a nationalized industry. In five years he had made a theoretical profit of £18,640. His wife didn't allow him any money for betting, so on the few occasions when he had to take her place he became mute of malice. He was surly, and made useless by circumstances, but he had never been in trouble with the police, so they accepted him as a good citizen, and asked their questions patiently, almost genially.

"I know you feel you can't describe any of them, Mr. Crewe," the detective-sergeant said. "But there must be something that you noticed. If one of them had a mustache, now. You'd have seen that?"

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Crewe shook his head again.

"You mean a man sat a few yards away from you and you didn't see his mustache?"

"I didn't."

"There you are. They were all clean shaven. You didn't remember a mustache, and you were right."

Crewe looked bewildered.

"What we have to do is get these men identified. They all had names. If you heard any part of their talk, you might have heard one of their names. They were called Joseph Ferguson, Maurice Reid, Harry Walters, Morgan Price."

Crewe yawned, and sat down with his stomach resting on his knees. He looked up, blinking, then shook his head again.

"We have only one photograph. It's of Joseph Ferguson." He held out the picture of a dark, square-faced man, with a large, strong nose, and a suggestion of amiable jowls. He looked like a first- or perhaps a second-generation Englishman. "Was this man here?"

"Never seen him."

"Are you prepared to say he wasn't here?"

"No, I wouldn't say that."

"Is there anything you would say? Look, Mr. Crewe, the position is this. Four men arranged to meet here around ten-fifteen before going on to the airport to get on a plane that was supposed to leave at ten forty-five. Now, I'm asking you a straight question, Mr. Crewe. Did they come here?"

"There was men here. They had whisky. They drank it and had another. And there wasn't four. There was three."

"Three? Are you sure?"

"Three. You got me mixed all the time, talking about four. Three doubles and splash and the same again. Fifteen shillings in the till. The wife'll tell you."

She sat beside him, indicating by twitches of nostril and eyebrow how complete was her dissociation from her husband and his stupidity.

"Seventeen and twopence in the till, Raymond," she said sharply.

"There was two bitters later," Crewe agreed dully.

"Two men?"

"Suppose so. Couldn't say."

"It was only three days ago, Mr. Crewe."

"It was all of three days ago," Crewe agreed.

"Did these other two speak to you?"

"They ordered bitters. It's a manner of speaking."

"I'll make inquiries among our regulars," Mrs. Crewe promised. She seemed to recognize the urgency of proving she was on the right side.

"As a matter of curiosity, did you hear any of the men's conversation?"

"Which men? I don't know which men you're talking about.

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First it's four, then it's three, now it's the two bitters."

"No, Raymond, not the two bitters. It's the three whiskies," Mrs. Crewe said officiously.

"You give me time, Ethel, give me time. I know better than you what happened. There was a word about horses and Ireland, but next thing it was accidents and Australia, or it might have been South Africa, then I lost interest."

"What did they say about horses?"

"Something about racing, it might be supposed," Crewe said triumphantly, and smiled at last. "But we've agreed that's not to be discussed. It was only the Grand National," he added generously.

"And Australia?"

"Nothing about Australia."

"Nothing?"

"Well, it might have been South Africa. It was a place like that."

"New Zealand?"

"No, not New Zealand. It was South Africa or it was Australia. I'll swear to one of them. I've an uncle in one of them and a cousin in the other, so I'm sure of my facts."

"Had the man who was telling the story been in Australia or South Africa himself? Mr. Crewe, this might be important. Did one of these three men say he'd been in Australia?"

"He did, always remembering it might have been South Africa. He wanted to tell a story about—what was his word?—premonitions. He had feelings about something."

"Feelings about what?"

"Ah, that's when I went back to thinking about the twelve-thirty at Lingfield."

"What part of Australia?" asked the detective. "Did he say, as it were, when I was in Sydney, when I was in Adelaide, when I was in Alice Springs?"

"Alice Springs?" Crewe asked, bewildered once more.

"It's a town in Australia, Raymond," his wife said quickly, with apologetic nods to the police. "If only I'd been in the bar that morning."

"You!" Crewe said contemptuously. "You'd have listened to more than was ever said. What I heard I stand by as the truth. One of them says to another: That reminds me—which I couldn't see how it did—about something that happened to me once. I had a premonition, he says, or words to that effect, when I was in Australia, or South Africa, and you haven't been there, have you, he says to that other, crushing the opposition. No, says the other. But I have, says the third man, interrupting. Isn't it time we left, or something like that, but there was no getting away from the story, which I didn't listen to, however much you sigh, and make faces," he said malevolently to his wife.

He closed his eyes again, and

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gave very faint groaning answers to the interminable questions about cigarettes, bow ties, girth, height, complexion, and accent. Finally he heaved himself up slowly, like an overburdened camel.

"Listen, if I was Scotland Yard I'd photograph the customers on the way in and cut off a lock of their hair before I sold them a mild-and-bitter. Not being Scotland Yard or female, I got my own business to attend to and it's not and never will be other people's. Anxious as I am to help."

Mrs. Crewe went to the door with the detectives.

"If he knows anything more I'll get it out of him," she whispered. "And when I find the two bitters I'll let you know."

The detective-sergeant gave her a grim smile of gratitude as he got in his car.

"If the crooks were as slow-witted as that lot," he said to his subordinate, "we'd have crime stamped out in a week."

Brickford Airport wasn't much more than a meadow cut by a macadam path, with a few sheds clustering at one end. It had a primitive look, as though someone were about to take off in a bid to fly the English Channel. It was the headquarters of the local flying club, but was also regularly used by several small charter planes.

Too many questions had already been asked at the airport, and when the mechanic saw Detective-Sergeant Young he dipped his head at once into the engine of a small, red, open plane that might have been made for the Wright brothers.

Sergeant Young looked sentimentally at the innocent little plane, and sighed. "You're William Douglas?" he asked.

The mechanic raised his white indignant face, and nodded. "Police?" he asked fiercely. "Or from the Daily Something or Other?"

"I'm from the police."

"Right. Here it comes. I don't need any questions. I don't want any questions. I've had enough. You just listen. I saw the *Ormond* go. I heard Mr. Lee speak to his three passengers. I heard him say: What, only three of you? And one of the passengers said: We've waited long enough. It seems he's not going to turn up. We'll have to go without him. And the three of them got in and Mr. Lee walks over to me and says: I'm one short, Bill. Then he goes over to the caff to look but he comes back alone. Then he took off. This is the eleventh time I've been asked and I know the answers in my sleep."

"And did you see what the passengers looked like?"

"I did not."

"Was one of them taller or shorter than the others?"

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"I couldn't tell you."

"Did they wear hats?"

"Look! So far as they walked on two legs and wore trousers I can claim to have seen them, but I'd like it to be understood I won't have words put in my mouth. I was working on a club crate at the time, as I'm trying to do now, and I didn't look up, except after I heard Mr. Lee say what he said. Then I lifted my head long enough to see their backs as they went in the plane, and three is the number I saw. I watched the plane go."

Sergeant Young listened seriously, as though he hadn't read all this at the station earlier that morning.

"A man called Joseph Ferguson chartered the plane," he said. "Tell me, Mr. Douglas, would the pilot have gone without him?"

"Couldn't say. So long as the flight had been paid for. Mr. Lee might not have been able to let the other passengers down."

"The flight had been paid for in advance. But Mr. Lee and Joseph Ferguson had met at least once. Wouldn't it have been reasonable for Mr. Lee to say: Good morning, Mr. Ferguson?"

Douglas straightened himself slowly, and began to twist the wrench round in his hand. "But he didn't say it."

"Was he a brusque kind of man —inclined to be a bit short with people, I mean?"

Douglas considered the wrench, tossed it once in the air, and then dropped it in his pocket. "No. He was a friendly type. He might have been feeling a bit off because they'd kept him waiting." He looked sullenly at the sergeant, as though he were being forced into a game he didn't want to play. "There's another thing. Was what's-his-name, Ferguson, the only one of the four Mr. Lee knew?"

"He'd met a man called Walters. Harry Walters."

"Right," Douglas said triumphantly. "He might have said Hello Walters, or Hello Harry, but he didn't say that either. As only one of them didn't turn up, either Ferguson or Walters must have been there."

"He just wasn't feeling social. So there's nothing in that idea. Thanks, anyway."

The short young man came through the door of the office with his head down, like a bull expecting to meet a matador. He was dark complexioned, and although young he already had wrinkles on his forehead from raising his eyebrows.

He spoke in a high voice, but all he said at first was: "How do you do. My name's Murray." Then he sat in agitated silence, while the policeman stared at his slightly crumpled lightweight suit and the place where the button was missing from his shirt.

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"I came in about Harry," he said. "Walters, I mean."

"You want to make a statement?" Inspector Lewis asked suspiciously.

"In a way I don't. Suppose I just talk, and then afterward, if I've told you anything at all, we could write down that bit and let the rest go. I don't want to be mixed up in this at all, but I want to say if poor Harry was the man who missed that plane, I think it's likely he was murdered."

"Why?"

Murray looked intently at his cigarette, with the concentration of a watchmaker studying a broken hairspring. He took a matchbox from his pocket, carefully tipped the ash among the matches, and shut the box.

"The truth is," he said, "I'm an editor."

"What do you edit, sir?"

"A magazine. You wouldn't have heard of it. It's called *Vista*."

"I don't have much time for reading," the inspector apologized.

Sergeant Young tilted his head toward the inspector.

"I know it, sir. It's a poetry magazine, with novelists reviewing each other's books on the back pages."

"Mr. Murray, you wanted to tell us something?"

"I'm not here for the fun of it, am I? If you've read *Vista*, you must have seen some of Harry's poems."

"I can't say that I remember them."

"Well, he was a poet, and not a bad one when he got around to it. But—do you really mind if I tell this my own way? The trouble is," he said unhappily, "I can't think of any other way to tell it."

"Just go ahead, sir, your own way."

"Then it's about Harry. That's why I've come. Harry was always short of money," he said. "Other people can come back from places like Australia with gold dust clinging to the turnups of their trousers, but I don't think Harry had even a clean shirt when he got off the boat four months ago. He stayed with us for a few weeks, but my wife got a bit restive. Harry wasn't at all like the other people who wrote for *Vista*. I mean most poets today work for the B.B.C. and keep their trousers pressed, but Harry had a theory that poets should be poets and nothing more. So he got a bit short of money. I expect that people like yourselves, paid regularly, don't understand how awkward that can be. Is there anywhere I could put this cigarette end? An old helmet, or something of the kind?"

Lewis handed him an ash tray.

"We've heard rumors about people who haven't enough money," he said heavily.

Murray stubbed out the cigarette and lit another.

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"Your friend Harry had been in Australia. Had he ever been in South Africa?"

"I don't know everything about Harry," Murray protested. "But if he ever landed in South Africa they probably bounced him out again. Harry would never be tactful enough for a place like that. He'd think of something to annoy, like opening a black-and-white matrimonial agency."

"It's not important."

"Then I'll proceed. When Harry left us he'd been writing some rather good verse—sentimental savagery about the middle classes. Did you ever read one beginning: 'April's always been the month for worry; Bills hissing through the letterbox like snakes'?"

"No," said Sergeant Young. "No, I don't remember that."

"He wrote a few like that. They were good, so I made the mistake of paying him in advance for some more. Harry, having the money, really didn't have any inducement to do the work. It wasn't very much money, but he knew that if he did finish his sequence of odes to the bourgeoisie, he wouldn't get any more, so he thought he'd write something else instead. So, just when he was looking for an emotion to recall at boiling point, he met someone in a pub—a very amusing man, who'd been in and out of jail half a dozen times. So Harry thought, why not be François Villon?"

Inspector Lewis's lower lip began to project like a railway signal.

"Who was this amusing man?" he asked.

"François Villon was a French poet, sir. He became a member of the criminal classes and some of his poetry was written from their standpoint," Young muttered.

"Anyway, around then I thought it was my duty as editor to keep tapping Harry's shoulder, saying, What about those verses we've paid for? But Harry had sold a couple of poems about psychology, I think, to an American magazine that paid in genuine unforged dollars, so he had drinking money. We had some pretty hideous nights, I can tell you."

"Where?"

"I've rather forgotten the names of the pubs. I was at a loss most of the time. Harry would point out a character and say: Would you like to know what he brought down the ladder last night? And I would say: No, really no. Then we'd talk to the ladder man, and all I could think of saying would be: Have you been stealing anything interesting recently? So I had to shut up and have another beer instead. Harry mixed in and I couldn't. My analysis is that they liked him because he was—innocent. He wasn't the kind of man who could possibly have been a policeman."

"Go on, please," Inspector Lewis said.

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"He wasn't wasting his time," Murray said defensively. "He picked up a lot of good stories. There were a couple of sinister characters Harry told me had once been the reigning cracksmen of England. Go anywhere, steal anything. About two years ago they made a mammoth haul. Was there something called the Sackford diamonds?" He looked up inquiringly.

Lewis nodded. "In June, two years ago."

"Anyway, three of them planned that, three of them carried it out, and two of them were still in the house when the third man cleared off with the lot. They've been looking for him ever since. He's well known to a lot of the boys. They say he had exquisite manners, perhaps not in those very words. And every night at closing time one of the other two brings out a photograph and pushes it under your nose. Or so Harry said. He never pushed it under mine. They offer a reward for information about him, just like the police. The point of the story is they've never stolen anything since. They can't work alone, and they don't trust each other or anyone else either. Their lives are ruined; Harry said."

"I suppose you can't remember their names either?"

"I was never introduced," Murray said firmly. "I'd better come to the point. After a few nights, Harry turned up and said: The boys don't like you. They think you look like a plain-clothes man. I was pretty shaken, as anyone might be."

He looked appealingly at the inspector, who stared back with enormous detachment, as though he were studying him.

"Actually, I'd already suspected I was a social failure. I didn't much fancy having my face smashed in with a bicycle chain. So I dropped out."

"But Harry went on?"

"Yes. I didn't see him again for a couple of weeks, then he told me, in strict confidence, and I'm quite aware I'm betraying him, I feel like a louse, that he'd been asked to go out on a job with the boys. He said what if he was caught? He could do better than 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' anyway. It was one of those railway mailbag things, but he wouldn't tell me what or when. I was very unhappy about the whole thing. However, I knew Harry well enough to know he could never finish anything. He didn't take part in any robbery. He missed the train."

"Intentionally?"

"It was just the way he was. He was a man who was always rushing into situations and then drifting away from them. I don't know if he meant to miss the train. But he did. Then something happened."

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"Yes?"

"The robbery was a flop. Someone informed. There were to be four men in it as well as Harry. And three of them were caught."

"And Harry missed the train," Lewis commented. "This would be about five weeks ago?"

Murray nodded. "About that. I saw Harry the next day. He said his failure to catch the train might be misinterpreted. He said he didn't want to be François Villon any more, and crooks were tedious company. He said he was afraid they might be tedious enough to put him in a sack and drop him over London Bridge. He said all he wanted was a quiet place where he could write."

"Why have you come here with this story, Mr. Murray?"

"Naturally when I heard about this disappearing passenger I assumed Harry had had a mortal interview with one of the boys."

"Do you think he informed against them?"

"Well, you'd know, wouldn't you, not me? I couldn't tell you what Harry would do. He was an odd sort of man, but very likeable, in his odd sort of way," Murray said sadly.

They asked him a great many questions, but at the end of it they were no wiser, and they let him go.

When he had gone they opened the windows to let the tobacco smoke out, and then sent for the files on the train mailbag attempt, and on the Sackford diamond robbery.

"I hope this Harry is the man who missed that plane," Lewis said. "I'd like to meet him."

Moira Ferguson sat watching the Wades being interviewed again. Her manner suggested that she was present as a judge not a witness. The Wades behaved more like inexpert conspirators. In the four days since the crash of the plane they had lived in a state of shock interrupted by perpetual questioning; now they were so bewildered by their own evasions that they left a little of the truth in each abandoned position.

Charles Wade sat now gazing in mournful appeal at his two daughters, begging them silently for permission to say more than he had said. Hester gave him a quick glance of warning, then closed her eyes. Prudence scowled at the police, then quickly substituted an icy smile. She was sixteen, and her greatest fear was that they might think her unsophisticated.

Inspector Lewis, looking peculiarly solemn and incorruptible, like a judge at an agricultural show, examined all their faces. Sergeant Young looked around the room, a shabby room in worn chintz, a room with a view across a valley where the morning shadows lay like folds of drapery. He glanced at the roses that sprawled from a blue vase.

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"I'm sorry," Hester said. "They're dying. I've had no time to change the water." She looked quickly away from the roses, as though the sight of them caused her pain.

"So there's nothing you can tell me about Morgan Price. Nothing at all, except that he was about forty and had no bad habits. In fact, Mr. Wade, from what you've told me, I'd say he had no habits at all," Inspector Lewis said.

"He always thought he was ill when he wasn't," Prudence said in a kind of explosion.

"So he came here for his health?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure," Hester said, frowning at Prudence.

"But he lived with you as a paying guest?"

"Yes, that's true," Charles Wade said, glad of the opportunity to answer a simple question.

"How did he come to live here? And when?"

"About a year ago. We put an advertisement in a paper."

"Do you have any other paying guests?"

"No. Let me save you a few questions. We are rather poor. We found we had a spare room, and hoped to make a little money easily. Morgan paid his rent regularly, by cash," Hester said with some spirit.

"Had he no profession, no business, no occupation?"

"Not when he was here."

"Did you think he was a strange guest, Mr. Wade?"

Wade looked round for help. "I don't think so. People have independent means, sometimes. I still know some people who have, and some of them are shy."

"And what seems strange afterward didn't seem strange at the time," Hester added quickly.

"Can you tell me anything about his general behavior?"

"He liked doing chess problems, or at least he didn't," Prudence said. "He would set the pieces up and stare at them, then knock the board away and go to the window and look out. That was the way he read books too, for about five minutes at a stretch. He was always sitting down and getting up again. And he and Harry . . ." She looked at Hester, then let the sentence die.

"And he what?"

"Oh, nothing."

Inspector Lewis looked at his fingernails and Sergeant Young looked at the inspector. They appeared to communicate, for Sergeant Young drew a line in his notebook and turned the page.

"Now, what about Maurice Reid?" the inspector said. "I'm told he was a friend of the family. Is that so?"

"Yes," said Hester almost whispering. "A friend."

"How long had you known him?"

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"About nine months."

"And you'd seen a lot of him?"

"He took a cottage to be near them," Moira said contemptuously. "Joe never liked him."

"He was here the night before the plane left, Mr. Wade?"

"Yes, yes. That's true."

"How did you spend this—this last evening?"

"He had dinner here, but I went to a dance," Prudence said casually.

"Then . . ." Wade began. He looked in appeal at Hester.

"Then we listened to music," Hester said. "Records. Bach. Do you like music, Inspector?" she asked wildly.

"I'm tone deaf," the inspector said.

"I do," said Sergeant Young unexpectedly. He smiled at Hester. "Do you play, Miss Wade?"

"I play the violin," she said, looking at him for the first time, and appearing to be surprised that he should seem so like other human beings.

"I was once going to be a professional pianist. But I wasn't good enough. So I joined the police force." He looked cautiously at his superior, who smiled just enough to show that the sergeant was to be allowed enough rope to inspire confidence.

"What kind of man was Maurice Reid, Miss Wade?" Lewis asked more amiably.

"He seemed reliable and kind. He had a square, brown face. I think he had traveled a lot. He wasn't young—between thirty-five and forty, I suppose. He always seemed healthy, and almost aggressively clean." She looked gravely at the two detectives, who were brushed, scrubbed, shaved, creased, and shining, as if they had been preparing for inspection by royalty. "He had a flat in London. Down here he had a tiny week-end cottage, and lived alone in it."

"What was his occupation?"

"Something in the city, wasn't it, Father?" she said, trying to control the trembling of his hands with a look.

"So he had money?"

"Not real money," Moira Ferguson intervened again.

Lewis turned to her. "It was your husband who chartered the plane?"

"You know it was. I've said so, often enough. He had to go to Ireland on business. He chartered it for himself and his associates who in the end couldn't come. That's why these others flew with him—if they did. He was trying to fill up the seats. And I'll tell you now that he had an occupation. He was a company director, and his special interest was the Constellation Circuit—cinemas you know. He at least was respected by everyone," she said in a flat voice.

"I'm sorry to ask these questions now."

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She ignored the apology.

"Then there's Harry Walters," the inspector said.

"Harry?" Moira repeated with hatred. "He stayed with us. But there's nothing I can tell you. He's Hester's concern."

Hester stared at the floor.

"He was a poet," Prudence volunteered.

"A poet," the inspector repeated, apparently surprised. "Do you know anything about poetry, Sergeant?"

"A little, sir."

"I thought so." The inspector shut his lips and sank back in his chair.

Lewis sat up again. "Did he ever read you his poems, Miss Wade?"

"Read? Not exactly. No, he didn't read his poems to me."

"But he sometimes quoted lines?"

"I'm anxious to help," Hester said in a low voice. "But I don't see the point of those questions."

"I'm trying to form an idea of all those four men. They were all known to you. Did you know Harry Walters well?"

"Not exactly."

"Did anyone here know him well?" He looked directly at Moira Ferguson.

"I did," Prudence said. "He was always coming here for meals. And he used to play Donegal poker. With Morgan."

The inspector looked at the sergeant for help. "I've never heard of it, sir."

"So Harry Walters and Morgan Price were friends?"

"Not exactly."

"Is there anything that Harry Walters was, exactly?"

"Nothing that could be described in a few words. People aren't classified, like racing cars," Hester said in agitation.

"Take as many words as you like."

Hester looked desperate, and her father spoke quickly, trying to shield her from the heavy artillery like a loyal native with a bow and arrow.

"How can we answer these questions? What can one decently say of the dead? Harry was cheerful, entertaining, kind. He was helpful, even generous, sometimes."

Inspector Lewis nodded incredulously, and turned to Hester again. "He sounds like an ideal character," he said, on a note of suggestion.

"I know how I'd describe him," Prudence muttered. "Oh, I'm sorry, Hester."

"Please say what you think, Prudence," her elder sister said contemptuously. "Inspector Lewis wants information."

"I won't say a word," Prudence said, beginning to sob. "I promise you I won't, Hester."

"This is worse than words," Hester said.

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Moira laughed, implying that she could say a great deal about Harry, if she chose.

"Tell us what you want to know," Hester said.

"I'll try to explain, Miss Wade. One of these four men, all intimate friends of your family—and all known to you, Mrs. Ferguson—had such powerful reasons for wanting to disappear that he took the course of pretending to die on that plane. Shall we say that he missed the plane, heard of the crash, and discovered almost instantly—the same day, if he listened to the news bulletin—that no one knew which three of the passengers had traveled? He took the chance of pretending to be one of them, and of disappearing for good. There must have been something very strange in this man's private life to make him do this. You're in a position to know something of the private lives of all these men. In the public interest, I'd like to hear what you know."

"Oh, the public interest," Prudence muttered scornfully.

"There are other points," Inspector Lewis said mildly. "There's Mrs. Ferguson, here. She doesn't know if her husband is dead or alive. Some of the others might have been married—might even have fathers, or sisters, who are doing a bit of worrying now." He stopped, and gave them a minute to let their confusion deepen.

"I think, Hester," Wade began resolutely, "I think—"

"I think there's nothing more we can tell you," Hester said loudly.

"And there's the possibility of crime," the inspector said in a harsher voice. "The man who didn't fly on that plane may be dead. How are we to know unless you give us the facts?" he demanded of Hester. "Do you think that's a possibility, Miss Wade?"

He waited. No one spoke, although the silence had an intensity that suggested everyone was about to speak.

"You're all reasonable people," he said. "I'm not here to attack you. I came in the hope that with your help I might arrive at the truth." He looked again at Hester, and saw her make her decision.

"It's so difficult to explain," she said. "I think I must begin with Wednesday."

"Then Wednesday. Two days before the plane took off."

"Wednesday," she said wistfully. "On Wednesday morning everything seemed so peaceful. Father was painting a room . . ."

WEDNESDAY

CHARLES WADE STOOD on top of a stepladder, painting a wall with wild, frightened strokes. Harry Walters lounged against the door.

"Is there any advice I could give you?" he asked. "If you

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worked more from the wrist, wouldn't it look less like a hair shirt?"

"This new paint dries like glass and lasts forever," Wade said.

"But the wall behind it won't, Father. Shouldn't you have filled in the hole first?" Hester asked.

"It's only a little hole. It could have paper pasted over it," Wade said.

Hester tapped it with her knuckles. Sand streamed out of it and down the wall. "The ruined sides of kings," she said absently.

Wade stared at her with baffled, parent's eyes.

"You're in a destructive mood, Hester. Now I'll have to fill it in. Be a good girl and get me the bag of plaster. It's in the larder."

"Two flights of stairs," Hester said. She looked at Harry, who sat down in a corner and lit a cigarette.

"And bring a bucket with some water and another bucket for mixing," her father called after her.

"You should take longer strokes with the brush," Harry said.

Wade put down the brush, picked up a rag, and began to wipe the paint off his fingers.

"Harry," he said, "personally, I couldn't like you more. But you'll accept my advice—as a friend? You'd never do as a son-in-law."

"I'm not often taken for a marrying man. Are you warning me off the premises? I thought I'd been asked to lunch."

"Naturally you must stay to lunch," Wade said irritably.

"Then that's all right. Unless Maurice is coming. I can't eat when he's there. He takes away my appetite."

Wade sat down on top of the stepladder.

"Harry, you have insulted my closest friend."

"Keep your money in your socks when your closest friend is there," Harry advised.

"Harry, you say these things without meaning them. You say them in a casual way that is very annoying. You haven't any respect for people. Society . . ."

"Ah, yes, society," Harry said. He settled down comfortably to listen. In five minutes Wade would be far away from the subject of sons-in-law.

Hester went downstairs and into the big, square kitchen where her sister Prudence, surrounded by utensils, was muttering over a cookery book.

"Harry's staying to lunch. What could we have?"

"Something out of a tin's good enough for him."

"Prudence, don't be rude, and do find something we can eat today. I wish Mrs. Parsons hadn't gone."

"All that lovely boiled fish," Prudence said. "Cooking is an art," she informed her sister. "You wouldn't like to grate some onions for me?"

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"I'm fetching some plaster for Father. Another bit of the house is falling down."

She went upstairs again.

"How do you think the room will look, Hester?" Wade asked heavily. He picked up the brush again and began to wave it. "Do me a favor, Harry. Get me another tin of paint. It's in the larder downstairs."

"Prudence is in the kitchen. She's longing to see you," Hester said.

"Knife in hand?" Harry asked.

Hester waited until he had gone.

"What are you going to use this room for, Father?"

"Guests."

"Father, we don't want any more guests."

"We make ten pounds a week out of the one we have. Now, I don't want to be corrected, Hester. It's gross profit, not net. I know the difference."

"I don't think you know all the difference. I'm going back to medical school in the autumn. So you'll have to hire some staff."

"There's Prudence."

"Prudence is only sixteen. She should stay at school. But if she doesn't—she wants to go to the Academy of Dramatic Art."

"My dear daughters. Harley Street and—and the Old Vic. How proud you make me! But there's no problem here. When I get four more bedrooms into action—all double—I'll have an income of eighty pounds a week. Then I'll be able to afford cooks, butlers, anything. I wonder when Harry's coming back with that paint."

At the mention of Harry's name, Hester's expression changed. Her father looked at her in time to see the small, secret smile.

"Hester," he said sharply. "Don't have anything to do with Harry. I warn you. He's no good." He climbed down from the ladder and began to mix plaster with water. "At his age—he must be about thirty."

"Twenty-nine, Father."

"And he has no job."

"He's a poet."

"I'd like to hear some of his poetry."

"I thought you were in a hurry to get the room ready for more guests. Though I should have thought the one we have was a warning. Morgan gives me shivers."

"Morgan is a beginning. I'm going to work this place up into a hotel."

"Father, I don't want to interfere, but I'm sure this isn't a good idea about the hotel. It will be like the fruit farm and the antique shop. Couldn't we stop trying to make money before we've lost all we have?"

Wade took a little ball of plaster and spread it neatly over the hole, where it at once disap-

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peared. "If I'm not to have your help, Hester, I don't need your advice."

"You need some more plaster, anyway," she murmured.

"There's a space behind," he said angrily. He took a handful of plaster and forced it into the hole. "It will be all right when I've filled it up."

"The wall's beginning to bulge," Hester pointed out.

"It will be all right when it's dry."

Hester walked to the window and looked across the tops of the quivering green trees down into the valley and along the road, which passed through the solemn little village, dipped to the green fields where the distant cattle seemed like black-and-white wooden toys, then twisted up through woods to the top of Furlong Hill. She wanted to tell her father how much she loved home, and Furlong Hill; she wanted to tell him how often she had dreamed of floating in a boat across the slow green waves of the treetops; she wanted to make some gesture of friendship that would wipe away all resentment.

"Don't worry too much about money," her father said.

"Money? I wasn't thinking about money," she said sadly.

"Someone has to think about it. We're not rich, you know, Hester. We haven't much. I shouldn't be doing all this work myself if we had. But at last I see light ahead. I have a plan—at least Maurice has a plan."

"Oh, Maurice," Hester said in a voice of relief.

"To tell you the truth, I've had to put a lot of work in with Maurice. He obviously knows the tree the money grows on—these people who work at something mysterious in the City usually do. I've asked his advice often enough. But he's said to me quite frankly that one rocket looks like another until it bursts, and he doesn't want me to risk my capital."

"Father, he's right. Don't gamble on the stock exchange. Take Maurice's advice and keep what capital is left."

"At four per cent? You know we don't get enough to pay the grocer's bill."

"But Maurice knows better than you, Father."

"Maurice has been very excited for the last week or two. I'm convinced he's on to something big." Wade hesitated, and looked shyly at Hester.

"I've cashed some securities already," he said. "What are they worth? Four hundred a year. What am I risking?"

"I know we live in hard times," Hester said. "Even so, four hundred a year isn't exactly nothing."

"But it's safe. Maurice won't let me put money in unless it's safe. Hester, we might be rich—rich enough to live on capital again.

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What would my little medical student say to a year in Paris—or Vienna?"

"That's not the way I see it," Hester said shortly. "Please try to keep your head, Father. You know you're not good about money."

"And what do you know about money?" Wade demanded angrily. "You're only a child, Hester. It's not my habit to take advice from children."

"Nor from anyone else. Oh, this is much worse than your idea about the hotel. I can't let you risk the little capital you have. When you lose it, what shall we do?" Hester asked in agitation. "It's three years before I qualify—and there's Prudence. I'll speak to Maurice."

"Hester, I forbid it. Maurice is reluctant enough, as it is. I absolutely forbid you to say one word to Maurice. I know what I'm doing."

"Father, the wall!" Hester said.

Wade turned round. The wall into which he had been ramming plaster was bulging dangerously. There was a noise like a rifle shot, then about two square yards of wall, borne outward by the weight of the new plaster, crashed into the room and was buried under the sand that poured from above.

Hester looked at the ruins. "The home decorator," she said, impelled by the bitter force that nature provides to intensify the war between generations. "Oh, Father, I'm sorry," she said quickly, anxious for peace.

"It's nothing," he said. "Nothing. Only more money to be spent."

"Don't work any more now. Come down to lunch," she said uneasily.

"Lunch!" he looked at her sorrowfully, like a man who could no longer afford to eat. "Lunch. Yes, that reminds me. Be a good girl, Hester. Don't ask Harry to stay to lunch."

"He's already been asked."

"I wish you wouldn't issue these invitations without consulting me."

"But I didn't ask him. You did."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe anyone asked him. This kind of thing is always happening with him. Tell him he can't stay to lunch after all."

Hester looked at him angrily, then suddenly she saw the disappointment and weariness on his face. He stood beside the ruins of the wall, the inefficient man confronted once again with the wreck of his hopes. She went to him quickly and squeezed his hand.

"Father, even if it's falling down it's lovely to be home again. The view from this window is better—better than a week in Paris. Come and look out of the window with me. I'm so happy when I look over the treetops. Most people only see trees from underneath."

The two moved to the window.

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"It's you I'm thinking of—and Prudence," he said.

"I know, Father. I'll leave you with the view and go and speak to Harry.

"Has Harry gone?" Morgan asked.

"He hasn't stayed to lunch," Hester said, looking quickly across the table at her father.

Morgan's flat, usually expressionless face registered a brief smile, and he began to talk rapidly.

Wade took no part in the discussion. He was lost in a private world of monetary calculations, where the house, miraculously restored, was crammed with guests who paid large sums of money and incurred no overheads. He began to pencil figures on the tablecloth. "9 at £10 each." Then he thought of Maurice, and looked up smiling.

"How would everyone like a little trip to Madeira this winter?" he asked genially.

Hester smiled at him unhappily, beginning to realize that her father was like a greyhound, doomed forever to run round a circular track after an electric hare that would never be caught. She stood up, and began to gather the plates.

In the kitchen she found Harry with the soup saucepan in front of him. He was eating from it with a spoon.

"There was no sherry in any room at all," he explained. "So I thought I had better come out here to say good-by. Who's lunching here today?"

"Morgan. He pays for his board, so we have to toss him a biscuit now and then," Hester said coldly.

"Morgan drinks without getting any pleasure from it," Harry said. "He drinks alone in his room."

"Harry, how do you know?" Hester asked.

"I've seen the empty bottles. He hides them in his wardrobe, like Hemingway."

"But how did you come to look in his wardrobe?" Hester asked, shocked.

"It's the place to find empty bottles. Why is Morgan hanging around that room your father is painting?"

"Is he?"

"When I couldn't find any sherry I went up there again. He shot out of the room like a clay pigeon from a trap. If you don't want him in that room, getting in the way, I'll tell him doctors have discovered this new paint is a prime cause of T.B. That will send him off to London for an X-ray," Harry said.

Hester was worried when she went back to the dining room, and she found it hard not to take too obvious an interest in Morgan's face. She had never before met a secret drinker, and she looked at him now with a mixture of clinical interest and human

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sympathy, but she saw nothing but a cold, reticent face, with features that suggested strength far more than weakness. She wanted to help him, but she was surprised when she heard herself saying:

"I want to walk to Furlong Hill this afternoon. Would you like to come, Morgan?"

"A walk?" he asked grudgingly. "I don't know. I'm not sure. Yes, yes, thank you, Hester. In about an hour?"

"Morgan is a bit queer," Prudence said when the two girls were alone in the kitchen.

"He's probably going to sit in his wardrobe with the door shut, drinking," Hester said. "I wonder where Harry is."

When she went up to the attic she found Harry. He seemed to be tapping the walls.

"What are you doing, Harry?" she asked.

"You saw. I was tapping the walls. Looking for more weak spots."

Morgan's uneasy face appeared in the doorway. He stared at the sand and broken plaster on the floor.

"I didn't know you were going to make so thorough a job of this room," he said accusingly. "Are all the walls coming down?"

"Very likely," Harry said.

"If I were your father," Morgan said to Hester, "I should leave this room alone. It's too big a job for one man."

"But I'm going to help," Harry said.

Morgan wavered in the doorway, then left.

"He looks worried," Hester said.

"He does indeed," Harry said thoughtfully.

Morgan walked halfway up Furlong Hill with Hester before he was overtaken by ill health. He clapped one hand to his side, waved a hand weakly in the air, and leaned against a tree for support.

"I can't go on," he said.

"What's wrong, Morgan?"

"It's a pain at my heart, that's all. I suppose it's nothing, really."

"Have you ever had trouble with your heart before?"

"I've suspected for years that there was something wrong."

Hester looked at him thoughtfully. In the short time she had known him he had suffered from his liver, his appendix, and his tonsils. She knew nothing of how to treat a hypochondriac invalid.

"Are you unhappy about something, Morgan?" she asked.

"Unhappy? I feel as though I were being knifed," he said in a gasping voice.

"But is there something else troubling you, Morgan?"

He groaned. "My heart!"

She sat down beside him. "We must wait until you're better."

"Hester? Did you see some strangers in the village?"

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"I didn't notice. Probably. It's August, Morgan," she said impatiently. "The village is always full of tandem bicycles or foreigners doing England in a one-day coach tour."

"Your father told me this was quiet country where strangers never came."

"It's not Father's fault that England is small and everyone has a holiday in August. Would you like to come home and rest?"

Morgan rose, wincing, and hobbled painfully down the hill. The path plunged steeply through the woods. He looked at it as though he thought it had been mined.

"The country life is wonderful," he said, groaning a little.

Hester turned her mind away from him. She saw that the blackberries had ripened early. She picked some, and ate them. She held out a handful, offering them to Morgan.

"They might be poisonous," he said.

I thought you said you'd been brought up in the country. Where did you live, Morgan?"

"I was born in London. My father—well, I'm too old to talk about my father," Morgan said, hatred flashing across his face. "He wasn't a careful man about money."

He stood up, and they went on.

About fifteen yeards above the road Morgan stopped and clutched Hester's wrist.

Three men were drooping along the road. They weren't at all like the strangers who usually passed through the village bent under rucksacks or excessively tweeded. They wore jackets of a markedly Edwardion style, trousers that were tight everywhere, and narrow, pointed shoes.

One of them sat down by the side of the road and began to dust his shoes with his handkerchief.

"I limp so bad," he said.

"Smell the country air," another advised bitterly. "You haven't breathed so good since you was a boy at Southend."

"Five miles to the next pub," the first said. "Turn right, turn left, turn right round, cross the field with the bulls, and I'd fight the field full of bulls to be back in Old Compton Street right now. What gave that foggy-boy the idea he was living here? Living! The country is the part of England they should dispose of, which is what I'm going to do when we get to that railway station."

Morgan stared after them down the road. Hester, looking at him curiously, saw that he was standing erect and breathing naturally. His heart attack appeared to be over.

"Go on, Hester. Don't wait for me. I think I'll sit around and rest for a little," he said in a strained voice.

"You're sure you're all right?" she asked doubtfully.

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She was glad to leave him. She wanted to walk alone and think about Harry.

She crossed the road and went into the woods on the other side, her mind moving irresponsibly around Harry's appearance, changing his clothes, seeing that his hair was cut regularly and his shirt was always clean. She thought of the attic room as her father had planned it, with a white floor and green rugs. She furnished it with a desk and some clean paper, and set Harry to work, writing a more jocund version of *The Waste Land*. In the autumn they went to Italy, and lived simply in a villa within reach of Florence.

She came down on the road again and walked through the village. Poetry didn't earn much money, but there was satisfaction in being heralded at literary lunches and making experimental dashes into the poetic drama.

Moira Ferguson waved to her, and she smiled back.

"Come in and have some tea," Moira said. "Joe's raging against Harry, and it's much nicer for him to have a new listener."

Hester made the correct social noises and then went in, although Moira Ferguson always made her feel immature and badly dressed. Joe treated her like a favorite niece, and the household was an entrancing but resistible specimen of the comfort associated exclusively with wealth.

Inside the house, in the corner by the fireplace Uncle Joe now sat worrying about the weather. It was hot, it was hot even for August, and people were staying away from the cinemas he owned.

"Do they care?" he demanded passionately of Hester. "In the winter they come begging, they stand in queues, they go to my managers with tears in their eyes, two, only two, they beg. Now, in the bad times, they keep the half crowns in their pockets and walk in the park instead."

"We have no money, Hester," Moira said comfortably. "Just fancy, we are ruined." She put a finger idly on the bell and a parlormaid materialized with a tea tray.

Hester accepted her tea. She wanted to turn the cup over and see if the price was written on the bottom. Joe looked at her, grinning.

"Twenty-five shillings each, these cups cost," he said.

"Uncle Joe, you are clever," Hester said admiringly. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

"It's a parlor trick," Moira said contemptuously. "He can always tell when people are wondering what something cost. That's the kind of thing they often wonder, in this house. They don't ask about the Shropshire Fergusons, nor even the Berlin branch of the family. It's always what it cost."

"But I wasn't thinking how

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much the cup cost," Hester protested. "I—I—"

"You were thinking, perhaps, I would like it to be known how good our cups were," Joe said. "You come here," he added in a voice of immense sorrow, "to see how the rich live. You are a welfare worker in reverse. But you come to the wrong place, my child. We don't live as the rich do. We are the little pigs who have built our house of paper money, and one day the wolf comes and he huffs and he puffs and he blows our house down. So inside the house we must tell ourselves we are very happy. But when the house is blown down, what can I do? Only one thing. I can drive a car. Perhaps when you are buried you look round on your way to the churchyard, and find I am driving the hearse."

Hester began to laugh. She liked Joe and the blasts of energy that came from him. Moira looked sulky and bored. It was possible she had heard the joke before.

"I wanted to ask you, Uncle Joe, is Harry really your nephew?" Hester said cautiously.

Joe swallowed his tea and crashed the cup on the table. He was as dismal as if he were staring through a series of empty cinemas. Moira looked at him angrily.

"Harry came back to the London flat one night with Joe and said he was his nephew," she explained coolly to Hester.

"It was true. For the night, he was a relation," Joe said.

"And he was going next day. But he was very interested in music. We have a hi-fi in London," Moira went on. "It's too loud for the country. You see, Harry spent the first few days just listening to hi-fi," Moira said, beginning to smile. "It seemed rude to interrupt him."

Joe scowled. "Then I begin to tell him: You'd like to go soon, Harry. This very evening, he says, but the banks are closed, can you cash a check? A very small check, Harry, I tell him. A very small check indeed. How much is it worth to me to get rid of Harry? Ten pounds, perhaps, I think, but he makes it twenty. He is about to go. Suddenly it is raining. His coat is at the cleaner's, he tells me, and he'll have to stay the night after all. So what happens?"

Hester smiled sadly. She wanted to leave, but it was hard not to hear everything about Harry.

"What happens?" he repeated. "At three that morning I am playing Donegal poker. I go to bed at six with Donegal poker insomnia. It is true I have won, but all I have won is my own check back from Harry. The next day I have to see accountants, managers, lawyers—it is very difficult for me. But Harry is not difficult. He is happy. He is writing a poem. We mustn't disturb him, Moira says."

"The next afternoon, at five, he

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goes—with another check, because the banks are closed again. At eleven he is back, with friends he wants to hear our hi-fi. Take the hi-fi, Harry, I say. Take it and go."

"The next morning I find him telephoning dealers, asking what they will give for a secondhand hi-fi. Now I want to get angry. Moira stops me. He's a poet, she says."

"He is a poet," Moira said softly. Hester looked at her with the astonished glance of a woman acknowledging an enemy. A flash of contempt for Moira's forty years crossed her face like a beam of light.

"He is a poet in words. That is now of no importance. I am a poet of money. Words! We have too many words. Word poets talk all the time of love and death. People fall in love and they die, and no amount of poetic advice has ever helped them to do either of those things more successfully."

"But I was telling you about Harry," Joe said in a somber voice. "In the end I say we are going to the country for a week. We lock up the London flat, I tell him. I am sorry, I say, but this time it's good-by. And what happens? He comes with us to the country here. I spend the first night in the quiet of this village playing Donegal poker. I am lucky he doesn't stay in London, steal my wife's jewelry."

"Which is in the bank," Moira said, yawning.

"Because he is a bad man. I warn you, Hester, he is bad. He's the kind of man who would pawn his grandmother's crutches to buy a drink for a friend."

"Thank you for the tea," Hester said in a furious voice.

"You're angry?" Moira inquired curiously. "Has Joe said something to offend you? Don't take him seriously."

"I don't think it's right to say these things about Harry," Hester said. "You shouldn't say them, Uncle Joe. Whatever Harry is, he's honest. You just don't understand him."

"I don't understand him!" Joe repeated in amazement.

"No you don't. He's not one of the people who's interested in money. He stands for something much finer than money. He doesn't know about money, and because he doesn't worship it as you do you think he's no good. I agree with him. I despise money."

"But so do I," Joe said. "My dear child, I couldn't agree with you more. So there's no argument. I won't quarrel with you. You know, Hester, I'm not even rich. I owe much, Inland Revenue is after me, and I leave the rest to Harry."

He looked at her anxiously. She didn't smile.

"I'm a ruined man, Hester," he said pathetically. "Television and the weather—I can't survive them. I'm going to Ireland on Friday to

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buy some new cinemas, try to earn a little something."

"How are you going?" Hester asked coldly.

"I'm flying," he said. "I've chartered a plane and it has three empty seats. Do you happen to know anyone who would like to share it?"

Hester walked home through the woods without looking at them. There was a world inside her head, and it was filled with a dozen versions of a defenseless Harry overborne by enemies. England was a country that didn't appreciate its poets until they were playwrights, or dead, but even so she was astonished by the malice which her father, Uncle Joe, and Morgan had shown toward Harry. She couldn't endure any more attacks on Harry. She hesitated at the gate, and then turned away from the house and walked through the woods to the ruined chapel.

The chapel was roofless and derelict, but it had the melancholy romantic air that ruins so easily adopt. Nettles sprang through the cracks in the stone floor, but beneath this lay the bones of long-dead wool merchants, so that as well as its other charms, an implication of mortality lingered inside the broken walls.

Harry was sitting on one of the fallen stones.

"I came here to think," he said in a guilty voice.

"All right. I'll leave you."

"Hester, please."

She sat down beside him.

"I've been given a lot of advice about you today, Harry. Are you so bad?"

"I'll tell you the truth. I'm no good at all. You'd do the right thing to tell me to go now. But I can't make myself go, unless you tell me. I can't move, with love of you closing over the top of my head."

He knelt beside her and she put her hand on his shoulder. "So bad, Harry?" she whispered.

"In every way. You only have to trust me, and I'll let you down."

"It's not true, Harry," she said, beginning to cry quietly. "Anyway, you're a poet."

"Yes, in a way. Yes, I am."

"So you wouldn't be the same as other people."

"I'm telling you, I'm worse than other people. You've no right to make excuses for me. And if I'm a poet I'm too lazy to be a good one."

"I don't believe it. You haven't had a chance. You've had too much worry, with nowhere to live and no money."

"Listen, Hester. I'm trying to tell you. I've had plenty of places to live, but I've been thrown out of most of them. When I was sent down from Oxford my mother couldn't bear it any longer. She threw me out too. I went to Australia. I wanted to be an old-fashioned remittance man, but she

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wouldn't send me the remittance."

Hester attempted to laugh.

"When did you come back from Australia?"

"About four months ago."

He stood up.

"Hester, I'll have to go away. I want to tell you how I love you. I want to steal all the words of the poets and make a chain of them that will hold you forever."

She waited. He moved away from her, and for a minute they were poised in silence, with emotions swooping between them like birds.

"I can't say anything, Hester. I was trying to write something when you came. Here it is. It's on an envelope."

He felt in his pocket, then gave her the envelope, and she read:

Her strength's a language that will
not speak to strength
Or understand the strong who love
and praise.
She's marked to choose the man
who's weak,
Who'll ruin all her later days.

"You understand I haven't finished it?" he asked anxiously. "A clumsy offering, but it means something. I'm not giving it to you as a love poem. It's a warning. You think now your strength is enough for two. You're making plans, you know. Soon you'll feel you have no right to marry a man who is strong. Hester, you've the air of a woman who wants martyrdom. I'm the man to give it to you."

"You don't mean all this, Harry," she said in distress.

"Be quiet. Goodness is as much a part of you as redness is of a cherry. I'm the worm that will eat the cherry away, redness and all. You think now you can change my character, tidy me up, get me a nine-to-five job, give me a room to work in, and watch the self-respecting income roll in one door while the works of genius roll out the other. But the cherry doesn't change the worm. It's the other way round. I'm an experienced worm. I know!"

Hester looked at him with the intensity of someone waiting for a miracle to be performed.

"You're the fourth person to tell me today how worthless you are. I don't believe it."

"What made you come here now, Hester?"

"I came here to think, too," she said, flushing. "I'd like to be buried here."

"Now?" Harry asked. "You're in a hurry, aren't you?"

"Of course I didn't mean now. It was only a mood."

"Anyway, you couldn't, unless they made a special place for you, like Napoleon or Lenin. Just tell me how you'd like it. What about a mortician's dome in rose-colored plastic?"

"It's nothing to laugh about," Hester said, beginning to laugh. "I was being perfectly serious. I'd like to be buried here. There are

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vaults at the other end. Prudence and I used to play here with the Peters boys, and they raised one of the stones and we all went down and sat beside the coffins and smoked Father's cigars. He used always to have boxes of cigars, it was before we lost our money. Prudence was the youngest, much, but she was the only one who wasn't sick."

"You were all sick in the vault?" Harry inquired with interest.

"Oh, no," Hester said in a shocked voice. "Even the Peters boys wouldn't have done a thing like that."

"Is this a roundabout way of telling me I have a rival called Peters?"

"I've told you. I've never been in love. I don't know what it's like to be in love," she said stiffly.

"I don't know what it's like for a girl. It makes a man want to smoke. Have you a cigarette on you, Hester?"

"I bought some for Father this afternoon." She took a packet of cigarettes from her bag, and gave it to him. He lit one, and absently put the packet, with his own matches, in his trouser pocket.

She considered the action.

"You can give me a cigarette case for my birthday next month. I like cigarette cases and watches —they give a man something to pawn in time of need," he said easily. "Let's get back and have some tea, shall we?"

They walked back together, without exchanging a word of love. They went quietly in by the back door to the kitchen.

Harry sat down, with a sigh.

"Put on the kettle, there's a good girl," he said. "Hester, you'll do me a favor? If Morgan talks of changing his room, you'll tell me?"

She stopped, with the teapot in her hand.

"But why?"

"One of my peculiar ideas. I'm always having them. I'll offer you something in exchange. Don't trust Maurice."

"I thought it was Morgan who interested you," Hester said.

"Morgan is a special case. Do you know something, Hester? Your father is a man who lures catastrophes. He's what you might call accident prone, but his accidents are all economic. I think Maurice will be one of them."

Hester poured the tea. "I wish people just for one day would stop warning me against other people," she said drearily. "If you want to know, I don't believe anything you say about Maurice. He's the best friend we have."

The door opened, and Morgan's pale face, looking bonier than ever, appeared.

"Harry," he said grimly, and came into the room. "Harry, I want a word with you."

Harry put his cup down. "Is it going to be an ugly word?" he asked regretfully.

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Morgan advanced. "Have you been in my room?"

"And what would I be doing there?"

"I told you he was no good, Hester," Morgan shouted. "I don't know what he was doing in my room. If he came to pilfer he did a clumsy job."

"You should know," Harry said. He was beginning to grin in an excited way, like a nervous sniper marking down his target.

"You've been searching my room."

"If you accuse me of searching your room, you're accusing yourself of having something to hide," Harry said in a reasonable voice.

Morgan moved forward angrily when Hester stepped in front of Harry.

"No, Morgan," she cried.

Wade came bristling through the door.

"What's all this, what is it, Hester?"

"Shall I tell him?" Harry asked insolently.

"We'll settle this later," Morgan said, muted and polite, like a hangman discussing business with the prison governor.

Harry looked quickly at Hester and her father.

"It's only a little row in diapers and a blue bonnet," he said airily. "It may never grow up at all. By dinnertime it will have shrunk back to an embryo."

Wade looked at him hopelessly.

"Harry, I hate to say it, but I haven't asked you to dinner. Maurice is coming over tonight. I wanted to have a private talk with him."

"Then I'll go back and dine with Uncle Joe," Harry said without embarrassment. "I've been neglecting him a bit, lately." He turned to Hester with his face drooping into melancholy again. "Good-by, Hester."

Harry found Moira lying in sulky idleness on a chaise longue by the sunny windows. Blue lights were shining in her black hair.

He sat down on the floor beside her.

"Would you like the curtains drawn, or is your hair guaranteed fadeless?" he asked her.

"Harry, where have you been all day?"

"At the Wades'."

Joe's going to Ireland."

"Why?"

"He says he wants to buy some new cinemas but his real purpose is to get away from you. He says perhaps he'll buy a farm in Ireland and stay there until you go away. He says you're giving him a nervous breakdown and he can't bear another week of it. He's so keen to go that although Aer Lingus is booked up because of the horse show he's chartering a plane. He was taking a couple of directors with him, but now their wives are ill or they're having alcoholic cures or something and they can't

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go. He ought to cancel the plane but he's trying to find someone else to share it and even if he can't he's going alone. I think that's extravagant. It has four seats."

"He'll be able to put his feet up. Have you any cigarettes in the house, Moira?"

"There's a box somewhere. Oh no, there isn't."

Harry stood up and walked restlessly to the mantelpiece. "Would you like to ring for some?" he suggested.

"I can't. I'm sorry, Harry, I can't. Joe says as he only smokes cigars and would never let a cigarette touch his lips and I don't smoke at all we're not to keep cigarettes in the house. He says you smoke them all. Harry, he's getting restless. He doesn't want you to stay."

"Is Joe really trying to get rid of me? Or is he trying to get rid of you?"

"Me? Joe trying to get rid of me? Harry, why should he?"

"Is he taking you to Ireland?"

"No."

"Is he taking me to Ireland?"

"No."

"So he's going to leave us alone together, in this house. Do you suppose he'd be happy about that unless he wanted trouble? I can see the way it will be," Harry said, his eyes beginning to shine. "He'll only pretend to go away. He'll come back suddenly, in the small hours. It's the classic situation, except that he may come by helicopter. Is he a *very* jealous man? Do you think he wants a chance to kill me, or is he only after divorce?"

"Oh, Harry!"

"If he goes away we'll have to be very careful. The only safe thing would be to have nothing to do with each other. Unless you want to be divorced."

"Do I?" she said. She sat and thought, until her face forecast all the lines and bitterness of middle age.

"Perhaps I don't. I'm used to dear old Joe," she said. "But, Harry, how awful if he's really plotting against me!" She began to cry a little. He wiped her eyes with a pale blue silk handkerchief.

She stopped crying.

There was a loud knocking at the door. She tried to control herself.

Joe walked into the room, looking fixedly at the floor.

"I knocked," he said. "In my own house, I knocked." He stood looking down with exaggerated meekness. "Harry, I have something to tell you. I am going to Dublin for a few days' rest."

"The last time I was in Dublin I didn't go to bed for forty-eight hours," Harry said reminiscently. "Moira says you're chartering a plane. Why don't you both go?"

"And leave you alone in his house? No, Harry."

"I wouldn't be quite alone. There are the servants."

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"I don't want them corrupted. In any case, Moira is not coming with me, Harry. I am going to Ireland on Friday. Would you like to pack now?"

"If I can find my clean shirts," Harry said. He looked at Joe, measuring him. "Anyway, this is Wednesday. I don't have to pack until tomorrow. I have to make arrangements," he said in a reasonable voice.

"All this time you have had to make arrangements, Harry. Now we do not wait for the arrangements. You understand?"

"Right," Harry said briskly. "Shall we have a farewell drink?"

Hester and Prudence were in the kitchen, preparing dinner. It had to be a special meal, because Maurice was coming, and a man of many virtues should be honored.

The whole family, in a way, depended on Maurice. He was the man who knew what to plant in the garden; when to ask the low-spirited out for a drink; how to do the math homework. He certainly deserved a good dinner, Hester thought, but it was a pity that good dinners involved cutting up so many things into such small pieces.

Hester sighed. "Isn't there some simpler way of preparing food, Prudence?"

"When we have simpler meals, you can make them by yourself," Prudence said. "There's no satisfaction in throwing some fish into a frying pan. If a meal can't be a poem, it isn't worth cooking. Please cut those carrots a bit smaller. What should we feel if we'd been content to fry a piece of bacon?"

"That we'd provided food with less expense of time," Hester said. "You can't be a perfectionist in everything, Prudence. Life isn't like that. You'll find out."

"Ah, the elder-sister line," Prudence said, sighing. "I warn you, Hester, in a few years you'll come to me for advice. I'll give you some now, if you like, while you stir the sauce. Don't have anything to do with Harry. If you marry him you'll spend half your life looking through a wire grating."

"Wire grating?"

"Visitors' day at prison."

"You're an insufferable adolescent, Prudence, and I hope your damned dinner burns," Hester said angrily.

"Oh, Hester, I'm only saying it because you're so good you can't see when other people are bad. Please go on stirring the sauce. I'm beating the egg whites and I can't stop. Maurice is coming to dinner. I do want it to be perfect. You think you can change Harry but I know you can't," Prudence said, beginning to cry.

"You're dropping tears in the soufflé. You'll spoil it," Hester said. "I'll go in and see if Mrs. Timber set the table."

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She heard a tapping on the dining-room window. Harry was outside, making expressive faces. She opened the window and let him in.

"Hester," he said, "I couldn't keep away. I get pulled to you like the tides following the moon." He held out his arms to her. She didn't respond.

"You'll have noticed that the ocean follows the moon for eternity but it never gets much closer," he said. "Do you suppose it's content with that?"

She moved dreamily toward him and he caught her wrist with one hand.

"Harry, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Only that Uncle Joe is turning me out. He thinks I'm not his nephew after all. But I came here about you."

"Me?" Hester asked in amazement, as though it had never occurred to her that Harry was more than an acquaintance.

"I had an attack of conscience. I'm not used to it—I feel very queer. But I know what Maurice is. He's practically got it embroidered on his shirt. Hester, he's a crook of the simplest kind. Can't you see it?"

"Why don't you attack him to his face?" she asked contemptuously.

"Because he's not attacking me," Harry said in a level voice. "Look, I've met a dozen Maurices. He could sell a horse a sack of paper oats for its lunch, and steal the shoes off its feet while it was counting out the change. Your father—"

"Leave my father out of this."

"He won't leave himself out. He's a glutton for money. He's the kind of man who's doomed to spend his life exchanging wallets with strangers as a sign of confidence. Maurice won't hit your father on the head to get his money. He'd just stand still and your father will ram it into his pockets. All Maurice has to do is look excited, as if he was on to something big and your father will be standing on his head trying to get the hook into his mouth."

"It's not true. I know Maurice. I trust him. What have you got against him?"

Harry suddenly grinned, like a man enjoying a private joke. He tried to look serious again, but the intensity had gone out of him, as though he had changed his mind about climbing to the top of a mountain.

"Maurice is disguised as a man who would remember to send his old Nannie peppermint creams at Christmas," he said lightly.

Hester walked out of the room. She was shaking with anger. There was nothing in her experience to explain Harry's changes of mood. Talking to him was like discussing the scenery with a fish, or a bird.

She was already struggling to

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bury Harry's remarks, but they kept reappearing in her mind like the shoots from a vigorous weed. She reminded herself again how easy it was to like Maurice; what relief his company gave to her father, who needed so badly to talk about war and money with another man who understood these subjects. Maurice treated Prudence and herself with an avuncular affection that was always understanding and never presumptuous. What brought him so close to them all was his air of having the same values; of believing in the same virtues, loving the same countryside, taking the same level-headed interest in music, painting, archaeology. When they had met him first he was only an occasional visitor to the village inn. Since then he had rented a small cottage on the far side of the village. Harry would probably never earn enough money to rent a barn. It was natural that he should resent such a solid member of society as Maurice.

When she had helped Prudence to take in the dinner, Hester was able to look at Maurice with what she thought was the old, untroubled affection. She listened in an accumulation of fear to her father's efforts to squeeze financial information from Maurice. It appeared that Maurice was determined not to discuss his business affairs, but Wade coiled his conversation around him, darting up with sudden questions, until it was revealed that Maurice was deeply interested in the financing of oil wells.

"Where did you say this oil was?" Wade asked.

"I didn't say it was anywhere," Maurice protested.

"I'd like to discuss it with you, if it's not too late," Wade said greedily.

"I wouldn't advise it," Maurice was saying. "There's an element of risk. . . . I'm willing to take the risk myself, because it's a moral and a real certainty. My own money is one thing, yours is another," he said in a voice that indicated his rectitude.

"What profit are you likely to make?" Wade asked, his face yearning toward Maurice. "Did you say twenty per cent?"

"I'm just as likely to lose," Maurice said. "By the way, did I tell you I'd brought over some Bizet records you might be interested in?"

"I can see you're avoiding my question about twenty per cent," Wade said in a good-humored voice. "I suspect you hope to get more."

"Perhaps."

"Much more?"

Maurice suddenly looked deeply serious. "I wouldn't like to tell you how much I hope to get. You might think I was having dreams of grandeur. I'll tell you what I'm

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going to do if it comes off. I'm going to leave the City, abandon the whole thing—now, don't laugh—I'm going into the furniture business." He looked round the table, smiling. "I'm tired of the shoddy stuff that's produced. I know a little about furniture. I've ideas of my own about design. So, as you can see, I'll probably lose all the money I make on Australian oil."

"Ah, yes, furniture. Furniture is a big subject," Wade said sighing. "It's Australian oil, is it?"

Morgan roused himself. "How did you find out about this oil, living so far from Australia?" he asked.

"I was taking a little trip for my health. I'd just made rather a lot of money on a take-over bid. I feel ashamed of it now. It's only a kind of piracy. I went to a little place in Western Australia where they were drilling for oil. One way and another, I made contact with some of the men on the job. You know they did in fact strike oil in Western Australia a year or two ago? That was a different company, nothing to do with me, but it made what had been just a dream a little closer to reality. So now . . ." He broke off with a laugh, not looking at Wade, who was leaning forward with his eyes shining.

Hester looked at her father. She wanted to get up and shake him. Instead she spoke politely to Morgan.

"Have you ever been in Australia, Morgan?"

He shook his head. "I've been in South Africa," he offered.

"Do you know, I did rather like South Africa," Maurice said easily. "I haven't been there for years—I know they have their racial troubles, very regrettable, I couldn't approve less, but perhaps it was the tension that made it seem so exciting. It's like a game of chess, you know—white to play and mate in three moves—but black has most of the pieces."

"South Africa is a problem," Wade said, sighing. "What were you saying about a contact in Western Australia?"

"A man called Garvin. By an extraordinary coincidence, he went to my prep school. What he said was that someone was going to get rich if he struck oil, and he didn't mind if it was me. He sent me a cable today." Maurice felt in his pocket and produced a form. He tossed it to Wade. It said, "Happy Birthday. Sam."

"What does it mean?" Wade asked.

"Code," Maurice said succinctly, and took it back. "It means they've struck, and the news will be out on Friday."

"No one seems hungry tonight," Wade said anxiously. "Would it be too much trouble for my daughters to bring coffee to Maurice and me in the little room? While we discuss the mystery of money."

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"There's a soufflé," Prudence said in a threatening voice.

"Oh, no, not a soufflé. Not a soufflé tonight," Wade said. "We'll have the coffee now. The soufflé will do another time. There will be all the less to cook tomorrow. I have to consider the cook, now that she's my daughter," he added, smiling to Maurice.

Prudence looked stricken. "The soufflé will do tomorrow!" she repeated. "Father, you don't know what you're saying."

"It will be all the better tomorrow. We can have it cold," he said with a pleasant smile.

"I'll rush out and buy a refrigerator," Hester suggested.

She stood up, then bent her head forward, listening.

"I thought I heard a noise upstairs."

Everyone listened.

"I think you're right," Maurice said.

"It's that damned Harry, searching my room again!" Morgan shouted.

They all began to move out of the room. In the hall they met Harry, coming not from the bathroom but the kitchen.

"Did you hear something?" he asked blandly. "Because I thought I did."

They went upstairs, moving far more cautiously now that they feared the existence of a real burglar.

Morgan, followed by the others, rushed into his bedroom. There was no one to be seen. Maurice ran along the passage and opened another door. It was Wade's room. He hesitated briefly, then pounced at the far side of the bed.

"I've got him," he cried, looking bewildered at what he'd got.

It was a small, fair youth in green trousers and a yellow pullover. He stood with his face sunk on his chest while the others crowded into the room.

"Ring for the police, Morgan," Wade said, but when he looked around Morgan wasn't to be seen.

"Don't call in the police, Guv'nor," the boy whined. "It's m'first job, and I've stolen nothing. Why don't you kick me round the room? You'd like to give it to me, wouldn't you?"

He made an appealing gesture of martyrdom. Wade shrank away.

"Ring for the police," Maurice, the voice of society, repeated.

The boy still stared at his toes. "I'd never have done it, except I thought I'd pick up a watch or a fur coat. I've no money and no job and m'mother's ill. I'm a waiter, see, I was away ill and lost m'job and m'mother's in the hospital. I'd be working if I had the chance. All I need is a chance, see, and I'd work as well as anyone." He stood drooping before them, one of the system's rejected serfs.

Harry laughed. Wade looked at him reproachfully. Harry was always striking the wrong note.

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"Give him a job," Harry said cheerfully. "You need help in the house, don't you?"

"I'll go straight," the boy said eagerly. "Honest, Guv'nor, it's m'first time up a ladder and it'll be m'last. If I had a job and some money . . ."

Wade hesitated. "Do you think he's speaking the truth?" he asked weakly. "Hester?"

"I don't know. The police—I'm sure we ought to tell the police. No. Couldn't we just let him go?" She thought for a minute, then assumed responsibility, as she always would. "Give him a job," she said firmly.

Prudence had been standing aside, delighted by the drama.

"If it means someone will wash the dishes, by all means give him a job," she said in a splendidly bored voice.

Wade looked unhappy. "We'll talk it over," he said.

"I'll take the poor fellow into the kitchen and warm him up a cup of tea," Harry offered, in a concerned voice.

Hester, following the others downstairs, thought she heard her name as the echo of a whisper. She turned. About two inches of Morgan's face was visible through his partially open door.

She went back.

"Hester," he said, and groaned.

"If you're not well, Morgan, why don't you lie down?" she suggested.

"Hester, have you sent for the police?"

She sighed. "No, we've decided to let him work here for a little. He might change, if he was given a little human sympathy."

"First Harry, then a ladder boy! I wonder what your father will collect next? Hester, I've been feeling very bad. Do you think a change of air would do me good?"

"It would depend on the air," Hester said.

"Didn't you say that Ferguson had chartered a plane to go to Ireland?"

"Yes."

"And he's looking for someone to share it with him?"

"Why don't you go and see Uncle Joe about it now?"

"I'm not well enough to walk all that way."

"You could telephone."

"I don't want to see Harry. He's downstairs."

"Harry's in the kitchen with the burglar, so far as I know."

"Hester, do me a favor. Keep them in there while I telephone. For ten minutes. Only for ten minutes, Hester. I don't want them hanging about, listening and worrying me."

"All right," she said reluctantly. "Just for ten minutes." She disliked being involved in even elementary conspiracies.

When Hester went into the kitchen, Harry was sitting with

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his feet on the table, talking to the blond burglar, who looked wispy and immature, like an exploited child, as he stood laboring by the sink. He had taken off his yellow jersey and was exposed in a flowered shirt, reminiscent both of the fashions advertised for Florida and of the waistcoats worn by young bloods in the bound volumes of nineteenth-century *Punch*.

"He's called Jackie," Harry told her. "He always washed the dishes for his Mum. That's why he's so good at it."

"What's your other name?" Hester asked gently.

"Daw, Miss."

"Let's have some coffee," Harry said. "We'll have it in the kitchen and Jack can tell us his life story."

Hester filled the kettle and put it on the stove.

"I haven't had what you'd call a life," Jackie said. "This is m'first chance since m'father died. I used to go round with him, see."

"What was your father's job?"

"He was a lay-about."

"How interesting," Hester said, trying to look enlightened. "What does a lay-about do?"

"He waits till people go out and leave the door unlocked, then he nips in and takes a handbag or a clock, or the change off of the mantelpiece. His idea was that he'd lay about and I'd nip in, but I wouldn't do it."

"But of course you wouldn't," Hester said, her mind already far away, worrying about the children of burglars. Would they learn to steal? If they admired their fathers, perhaps they would.

She went out of the kitchen and went to the bottom of the stairs, and called up softly to Morgan, who was waiting on the landing. He came down absolutely noiselessly, and went to the telephone. She stood by the kitchen door, making mental plans for the protection of burglars' children.

"I *am* speaking up," she heard Morgan whispering into the telephone. "Look, I want to fly to Dublin with you on Friday. Expensive? No, I don't think that's too much. Oh, I've just taken the fancy to see the place. I'm not sure where I'll be coming from. I'll meet you at the airport. . . . Brickford? I've never heard of it. What? What did you say the pilot said? A place called the Fairway Arms?"

She was listening with a detached part of her mind to the voices from the kitchen. She had an impression that Harry had been making jokes at Jackie's expense. She turned her attention back to the kitchen.

"Life is made up of moments of weakness," she heard Harry saying. "History would never get anywhere at all if it wasn't."

She stopped with her hand on the door. She was too tired to listen to Harry's endless theories.

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"Just in case you're as weak as the rest of us, would you like to take off the dainty gun you have under your shirt?"

Hester was appalled. It was impossible that a mere boy like Jackie should carry a gun.

"You know there's no reason to fire it at me," Harry said in a coaxing voice. "You'd only be destroying innocence. I'm not trying to turn you in. You'll get in bad trouble if you're found with a gun on you now. Old Bailey trouble."

"I'll do you in, you slimy bastard," Jackie said.

"If you pull that gun on me, I'll run for my life, screaming," Harry said. "That's a threat."

Hester tried to open the door. Someone was standing against it. She thought of Harry, bravely waiting to be shot, defending her.

"Let me in," she said desperately.

She pushed. The door opened suddenly. Harry, with one hand in his pocket, stood smiling at her. Jackie turned back to the sink.

"Jackie's going to be very happy here," Harry said blandly. "He looks happier already, don't you think?"

"I thought I heard—some kind of argument," Hester said.

"We were only getting to know each other. What are you going to do when you've dried the dishes, Jackie? Cosh your benefactor with a bicycle chain? Or do you mean to stay?"

"Stay."

Hester looked at them both uncertainly. It was impossible that they should be so calm if they had just been fighting over a gun.

"What brought you this way?" Harry asked.

"Just walking about. Haven't been in the country since I was a kid, see. Then I wanted a place to spend the night. I thought I'd doss down in that bedroom."

"Like Goldilocks," Harry said approvingly.

Hester was suddenly so tired of the conversation that she turned and left the room. Morgan had finished his telephoning. She thought she heard her father's voice. He was probably talking to Maurice about money.

She was anxious to avoid all of them. She didn't want to be confronted with another problem that night. She needed time to think of herself, to let her mind move slowly out of the climate of anxiety. She went out into the garden, and along the path to where the roses grew.

She sat for ten minutes or more, with the scent of the rose in her head, her mind slowly emptying, then filling again with languid dreams, imprecise and enchanting. Then she stood up and strolled across the grass toward the trees that were black shadows floating into the nearly black sky. She heard someone move.

"Harry?" she asked uncertainly.

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"I'm not Harry," a man's voice replied.

She turned to run.

"Don't be frightened," he said. "I'll go away. Look, I'm walking back toward the gate."

Hester stopped. It was a sign of hysteria, to run away from strangers in the dark.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I won't come near. I've been watching you in the garden. I know I've no right to be here."

"Then why are you here?"

"I saw a man climb up a drainpipe."

"Are you a policeman?"

"No, but I've been watching your house. He didn't climb down again. Are you interested?"

"He's in the kitchen. He's going to work for us."

"Do your servants always arrive by drainpipe?" he asked, and Hester laughed.

"Why were you in the garden?" she asked.

He didn't answer the question immediately. "Tell me something. What's the name of the man who came here to dinner—who came by car?"

"Reid. Maurice Reid."

"Reid." He sounded satisfied. "Have you known him long?"

"I don't see why I should discuss—"

"Oh, you're getting in a weak position," he said. "Now you've told me his name, you'll have to justify yourself. I don't mind how long it takes you, I like your voice. In gratitude for the name, I'll tell you why I'm here. I saw him in an underground in London, and I've followed him all day. But I didn't know if it was the right man."

"And is it?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell him you're following him," she said.

"Yes, I wish you would. What's your name?"

"Wade."

"That can't be all of it."

"Miss Wade," she suggested.

"Miss Wade, good night."

"Wait," she called, but he went away.

She went back into the house. Her father and Maurice were still talking. She knew it was possible to interrupt, to tell Maurice he was being followed, but he would look at her in amazement, he would think she was mad, there would be more questions and answers. The stranger had wanted her to tell Maurice—it was surely better not to act on the advice of strangers. The arguments swirled round in her head, then cleared away, leaving her to see that doubts of some kind were forming in her mind about Maurice. She watched his face carefully while she said:

"Maurice, there was a man in the garden. I spoke to him. He said he was there to follow you."

She saw Maurice's eyes drop

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swiftly with the effort of concentrated thought, then he looked up, still smiling.

"Some madman, I suppose," he said. It seemed to her he spoke with great effort. "Perhaps we should search the garden," he suggested slowly.

"He's gone," Hester said quickly. "He didn't know your name at first. He may have been making it all up."

"You told him my name?" Maurice asked sharply.

"What does it matter?" she said wearily. "It's not as though you had anything to hide. I told him my name, too."

Maurice walked round the room, and then said it was time for him to go. Wade accompanied him to his car, and then looked around the garden with a flashlight. As Hester had said, there was no stranger in the garden now.

INVESTIGATION

The story, as they remembered it, was like a damaged fossil found in the rocks; the story they offered was a handful of broken stone. Inspector Lewis sat now, patiently assembling the fragments.

"That's all, absolutely all, about Wednesday?" he asked. "What happened about this Jackie?"

"We gave him a camp bed in the attic, in the room over Morgan's."

"This man in the garden—he said he was following Maurice Reid?"

"Yes, I told you."

"Is that all you can tell me about him?"

They watched Hester gliding into the shelter of her secret thoughts.

"His name is Marryatt," Wade explained. The words sounded like the prelude to a statement, but the statement didn't follow.

"Do you know where we can find him?"

Hester shook her head.

Moira Ferguson leaned forward. "Is he that dark young man who has been staying in the pub?"

"Very possibly," Hester said.

"Because if he is, he's still there. I know about him, because we heard him come back in the middle of the night."

"What night?" Lewis asked.

"Thursday night."

"Can you tell us more about this Marryatt?" Lewis asked Hester stolidly.

"I can't. Not like that. One thing is always bound up with another. I don't want to say any more about him. Give him a chance to explain his own actions. If he's at the Running Fox, why not see him there? Or bring him here, and let him hear her repeat what she has to say," Hester said.

"I think we'll have to get hold of this Marryatt," Lewis said. He

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looked at his watch. "We mustn't keep you people from your lunch," he said in a hungry voice. "We'll ask him to come here after lunch, for a friendly discussion."

Lewis levered himself out of his chair. "Then we'll see you all after lunch. You were awake at one o'clock on Thursday night, on Friday morning, that is, Mrs. Ferguson?"

"I had to be," she said shortly. "Harry came back with us when we left here, and somehow, I don't know how it happened, we all began to play Donegal poker."

"Oh," said Hester, with so much pain in her voice that Prudence stood up protectively.

"Let's get on with Thursday," she said wildly. "It's mostly Morgan I think. Let's not stop for lunch. Oh, there's the phone."

"Answer it, please, Prudence," Hester said.

They heard her lift the receiver and answer, and protest, and then she came back in the room.

"It's for you," she said to Inspector Lewis. "Don't let it worry you. We like you to use our telephone. I told them you didn't want to be interrupted, but they said you did."

"Sergeant Young, please," Lewis said, and the sergeant went out to the telephone. Everyone waited with a feeling that some revelation was imminent.

The sergeant returned with his face stiff with excitement.

"Sir, the landlady, Mrs. Crewe at Brickford I mean, has found the two bitters. They are on their way to the station now."

"Lunch time," Lewis said jovially. "We must be off. Just get in touch with this Running Fox place first, Sergeant. Ask them if they have a visitor by the name of Marryatt. If you can get him on the phone and arrange for him to meet us here in about two hours, then that's so much time saved."

Sergeant Young seeped out of the room.

"Poor Harry," Moira said. "He was so happy that night. He won five pounds at Donegal poker. Then suddenly he said he had other things to do, and left. I'm sorry for him. It's not like Maurice or Morgan. As for Joe—he didn't fly. I'm sure. Don't ask me to explain. I'm just certain he didn't fly." She dabbed her eyes.

"Your husband had no business worries, Mrs. Ferguson?"

"It depends what you call business worries," she said. "He was ruined, if that's what you mean. He said he was going to be bankrupt, or taken over any day. But he wasn't worried."

"Is there any possibility that your husband's affairs were in such —such confusion, that he might have wanted to disappear?"

"Do you mean he didn't go on that plane? That he's only hiding?" she asked, her soft face hardening in thought.

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"I'm asking you."

"Oh, Joe wouldn't do that. He'd much sooner pay sixpence in the pound than nothing. Joe was so—so honest," she said, groping for the right word and finding it.

"On Friday morning you drove him into Cheltenham, early. Did you see anyone you knew there?"

"I don't believe we did," she said absently. "They'd know at the station. Why don't you ask them at the station?"

"We'd thought of that," Inspector Lewis said ironically. "They didn't know. They sell a lot of tickets, in Cheltenham."

"I'm so ignorant of police methods," she said apologetically. "I'm a child in the affairs of this world. That's what Joe said about me, always. But even though I'm ignorant, it does sound to me as though you're suggesting I didn't drive Joe to Cheltenham—or perhaps all you mean is that he didn't take the train from Cheltenham to Brickford? If you're really, seriously, suggesting one of these things then . . . I wonder what Joe would have said? I know. He'd have told me to get hold of a lawyer before I said another word. And I think that's what I'll do. So please don't expect me to tell you another thing about Thursday, about Harry or Joe or Maurice or the Australian, until I have a lawyer sitting by my side. I know Hester's sitting there thinking that only guilty people want lawyers. I will relieve your mind, Hester. I drove Joe to Cheltenham and I saw him buy a ticket for Brickford." She pushed the mirror back in her handbag and looked defiantly round the room.

"Wait till you see that Australian, Marryatt. He's someone who really does need a lawyer," she said maliciously, her voice accepting everyone in the room as an enemy.

Sergeant Young came back from the telephone, and for the next two hours the Wades were left in peace.

Inspector Lewis dropped the file of letters on his desk.

"When are those two bitters coming in? If they don't turn up, we're wasting our time here, eating dry sandwiches, giving the Wades the chance to plot out the next sequence. What do you think of the Wades anyway? The father looks to me as though he'd assassinated the Archbishop of York and was working round to a confession."

"Miss Wade, Miss Wade looked—looked very upset," Sergeant Young said, flushing.

"She's a pretty girl. Don't be taken in by looks, Sergeant," Lewis said sharply. "Ah, at last."

The two bitters were ushered in; they gave the impression they were trying to hide behind each other. One was a dark, earthy man in his middle years; the other was old and dusty.

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The sergeant took their names. The younger was called Benson; the older, Smith. Benson stared at his feet; Smith's wavering glance explored the corners of the room, as though he expected to find a guillotine somewhere. He was a grocer, and his appearance suggested that his shop was very small, and that the articles wanted by customers could only be reached by ladder. Benson was a nursery gardener.

"You were in the Fairway Arms around half-past ten on Tuesday morning?" the inspector suggested.

They looked at each other, and nodded.

"And there were three men having a drink," Benson muttered.

"We've talked it over. We can't describe them," Smith said in a voice that whined on a high note.

"You see, we go out to have a drink," Benson said.

"We'd no reason to think they were anyone special," Smith said.

"They weren't anyone special if they hadn't got killed," Benson said. "Who is?" he added somberly.

"We were talking. You don't think of other people in the bar when you're talking."

"Nor when you're being talked at," Benson said.

"And why did they get killed?" Smith asked. "I'll tell you, because they hadn't taken trouble with their horoscopes. Ten to one, their horoscopes would have told them to keep their feet on the ground that day. You want to find the one that wasn't there, don't you officer, don't you now? You get their horoscopes, get the horoscopes of the four of them, and you'll find the one who's still got two feet to walk on."

"Their birthdays—" Lewis began, but was interrupted.

"Don't talk to me about birthdays," Smith said. "You've got to have it right, to the hour and the minute. It isn't child's play, you know, astrology's a serious thing."

"Do you believe in astrology too, Mr. Benson?" Lewis asked desparingly.

"Astrology," Benson repeated contemptuously. "I've no time for that nonsense. I'm a numerologist."

"And can you plant potatoes by numerology? Can you tell when night frosts will end by numerology?" Smith asked wearily.

Benson scowled sideways at the policemen. "It was this kind of talk he was at, in the pub that morning. Just let him run on. You'll get the idea."

"You're in the habit of having a drink together in the morning?"

"The habit's arisen," Benson agreed. "Gets on my nerves," he added viciously.

"You didn't observe the appearance of the three men. You didn't hear anything they said?" Lewis asked Benson, who seemed more like an average man.

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Benson shook his head.

"And you, Mr. Smith?"

"While I was waiting for the drink, and with my mind running on the unhappy hour of Benson's birth, and before I was deafened by his talk of numbers, I may have heard a word from these men behind me I couldn't see. And the word caught my ear because I'm an astrologist."

Lewis began to fidget with a ruler.

"Are you trying to tell me, Mr. Smith, that these men were discussing astrology?"

"They must have been," Smith said. "They used a term that brought me up short in my tracks. Astrology, I thought, and I'll turn round and see what he looks like, but then he came back with the drinks."

"And what was the word?" Lewis asked in a voice of grinding patience.

"Now, it was on the tip of my tongue. I was about to say it when you interrupted me. But it's gone."

"Gone?"

"It was a term, as they might have said in opposition, or ascendancy, or constellation. Or azimuth. Now I wonder if it was azimuth?" he asked infuriatingly. "I was just going to bring it out, when you spoke."

"Would it have been a name?" Sergeant Young asked encouragingly. "Like Gemini, or Mars?"

"Might have been, might have been, might not have been."

"Taurus? Aquarius?" the sergeant suggested.

"I see you're a man of education," Smith smiled approvingly while Benson sneered.

"Virgo? Pisces?"

"Pisces? Now, that's a strange thing. It might have been something about Pisces, but it wasn't. Pisces? No. That was before, I've got it."

"Yes!"

"They were talking about fishing."

"But you said astrology."

"That's a different thing again."

"What kind of fishing?" Lewis asked. His face was impassive, but his voice was beginning to show the strain.

"Not salmon fishing. Not trout. Fishing in one of them far-off places. India was it?"

"Well, was it?"

"No. It wasn't India."

"They were smoking," Benson suddenly volunteered. "One of them had some cigarettes and as I walked over with the drinks he offered cigarettes to the others."

"A packet or a case?"

"Now you mention it, I—" He closed his eyes. "I'm sure it was a case. Yes, I'd take my oath it was a case. I couldn't tell you what kind of case. It wouldn't have been gold, anyway. I'd have noticed that. Now I see it. It was a long silver case. He opened it at both

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of them, and one of them took a cigarette. Or did they both? Now, I can't remember. Anyway, someone lit the two cigarettes with a lighter. I remember it was a lighter, but I don't know if it was the first man who used it. One man didn't smoke. Now, it's queer I noticed that, except that I'm trying to give up smoking myself, so I saw that this man didn't smoke."

"If you're finished," Smith said as he went on, "I heard this word about astrology, not sinking in at once, but pulling my attention, and I became conscious one of them was saying to the other this thing about fishing. 'My curiosity's satisfied,' he says, 'and I didn't like it.' Then another says about not having had the opportunity until the beginning of last season and the first says who has in this country anyway? That was the way it went."

"But how did the conversation go from astrology to fishing?" Lewis asked.

"Now that I can't answer, except to be sure they began with astrology. It might have been one word, you know, it might have been only one word, but it caught my ear. I'm very keen, very keen indeed, at hearing. Then Benson comes back and spoils it all."

Benson suddenly grunted. "Woolworth's. That's it. I was once an under manager at Woolworth's," he explained.

"Yes?" Lewis encouraged.

"I'm not now. I'm a nursery gardener for my health. But I was sitting there quietly drinking my beer, when I heard that name again. Woolworth's! If ever I drown I'll see the red front and gold letters come up before my eyes. Even through Smith's babbling I heard the name. Then one of these men addressed the other by name." He stopped to light his cigarette stub again.

There was a battle of silence. Inspector Lewis lost.

"The name. What was it?"

"It began with an M. It was the thirteenth letter of the alphabet. Was it Morrison? Martin? Morley? If I'd been concentrating, I'd have known, being interested in names."

"Morgan, Morton, Maurice," Lewis suggested.

"It's gone," Benson said in regret. "I'll swear to the M, but to nothing else. 'Woolworth's! What do you think about that?' one of them said. 'I'm afraid I can't think anything. I didn't see it,' says the second. And the third says: 'Woolworth's? What's all this? When did it happen?' And that's all. I'd have heard none of it if Smith hadn't been dragging out his old chart, and from the time he began talking about his horoscope, everyone else in the world might have been dead, for all I could hear."

Smith began to cackle. "Now I've got it," he said. "They'd been

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fishing in a strange place. It was Ceylon they talked about."

"They'd been fishing in Ceylon?" the inspector asked with justifiable amazement. "Let's go back over this again."

They went back over it again, but without enlightenment. Both men stuck to what they said, and refused to add to it. With all their peculiarities, they were honest.

The policemen returned to the Wades' house expecting to find Marryatt there before them. They had not much idea of the kind of man he was, but they naturally supposed he would have enough social sense to be disturbed by their summons. They felt the normal official irritation at being kept waiting; they were prepared to put him in his place.

When he finally arrived, half an hour late, there was no hint of apology in his bearing. He was a young man, with heavy shoulders, a strong, dark face, black eyebrows. He had an air of independence, almost of insolence. His face carried the odd, uneasy familiarity of something that had been seen before.

"You sent for me?" he said to Inspector Lewis, in a voice that rejected all respect for authority. He turned on Hester. "And I believe you told him to send for me."

She looked at him as angrily as he had looked at her. "I did. People seemed to be accusing you of something. I thought, being what you are, you wouldn't like anyone else to speak for you."

"And what am I accused of?"

"You are not accused of anything. You are being asked to help," Lewis said coldly. "In the first place, I tell you quite openly we'd have seen you anyway. We have a report from a Mrs. Lightfoot—isn't that the name, Sergeant Young?—yes, a Mrs. Lightfoot, who breeds dogs, bull terriers, I think—a report of what she thought a peculiar incident on the road, about half a mile from this house. She took the number of the car. It happens to be the number of the car that Maurice Reid hired from the local garage. She made this report quite independently. She hadn't heard of the airplane disaster. It was very easy to trace the car. Then when this question, the question of which man didn't fly in the airplane, came up, we went into the matter a little more carefully. She described Maurice Reid quite well. At first she thought he'd been assaulted, or that he'd been in a fight with someone. She had a glimpse of the other man; later, she saw someone in the village who she thought was the same man. Well, sir, what we've been looking for all the time is a lead into any peculiarity in the lives of any of those four men who were supposed to fly in that airplane. What Sergeant Young here has always said is that if we can

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find the man among these four who had some urgent reason for vanishing, then we'll know the man who took the chance to disappear when the plane crashed."

"Perhaps they did all want to disappear," Moira intervened coldly. "Except Joe, of course."

"And Harry," Hester murmured.

"But my dear, Harry always wanted to get out of his commitments. Surely you know that?" Moira said.

Marryatt, seeing, like everyone else, how Hester's already pale face turned paler still, spoke quickly.

"Get on with the questions. I'll answer them."

"No," Hester said. "It's not fair to put everything onto you. Particularly after what you said to me. You've accused me of enough, you know. And this isn't just a question of Maurice. It might be anyone. We don't know it was Maurice. But Father and I have talked it over, in the last hour, and we're going to tell the truth. The whole truth about the whole of Thursday. You can tell your part too, if you wish. Please remember," she said coldly, "we are going to conceal nothing, and there's no reason why you should."

"It makes no difference to me who knows my private affairs, now," Marryatt said significantly. "Go ahead, I'll listen and put my hand up when the time comes."

"Don't expect me to join in this soul searching," Moira said.

Hester looked sadly at the downcast roses on the table.

"Thursday . . ." she said.

THURSDAY

It rained on Wednesday night, and on Thursday morning the sky looked as if it had been washed blue for a colored advertisement. When Hester woke, the birds were celebrating. She was amazed to hear a tap on her door. Prudence always charged through doors without knocking, and no one but Prudence ever came to her room in the morning.

"Come in," she said, and Jackie appeared. He was carrying a cup of tea, and looked serious and dedicated.

"Good morning," he said in a reverent voice. He put down the tea and tiptoed out of the room again.

Hester looked at the tea in dismay. She didn't like to drink anything before she had brushed her teeth and washed and dressed; she liked even less to have the anxieties of the day appear embodied in her room while she was still in bed. She was remembering already that Harry had accused Jackie of carrying a gun. She wasn't particularly nervous, but she didn't want to be given morning tea by gunmen. She made up

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her mind that Jackie must go. She threw the blankets off and stepped out of bed. She washed and dressed quickly, mentally preparing her interview with Jackie.

As she brushed her hair she remembered that Harry had asked for the gun, but she wasn't sure what had happened in the minute before she entered the kitchen. Harry had asked for the gun; she didn't know if Jackie had given it to him. If Harry had the gun there was nothing to worry about, except that Jackie might be equally ready to use a bread knife. In any case, Harry would never shoot anyone; he was too good natured.

There was another tap at the door. "Breakfast is served, Miss," said a solemn voice.

She went down to breakfast, which consisted of strong tea and fried bread. "Still, it's nice not having to cook it," Prudence said.

Hester looked at the fried bread with hatred and began again to rehearse her scene with Jackie.

Her father was filling a notebook with small, neat figures. "Maurice is coming over early," he said. "We have business to consider."

Hester postponed the discussion with Jackie, and began to make plans for the interception of Maurice.

Maurice stepped out of the car. His square clean face was good humored, happy, and appreciative, as it so often was. He looked up at the trees and the sky, participating in the beauty of the summer morning. He seemed as solid and dependable as a pewter mug. Hester, coming through the garden to meet him, found his appearance infinitely reassuring.

"Good morning, Maurice. Have you the time—could I talk to you for a few minutes?" Although she knew that she trusted him, her voice was less cordial than usual.

"Of course, Hester," he said readily, and she wondered if she heard wariness behind the warmth.

They walked through the garden toward the roses which were rashly opening their hearts to the sun.

"It's so hard to say what I want to say," she murmured in confusion.

"Am I wrong, Hester, in thinking you want my advice about Harry?" he asked her quietly.

"Yes, Maurice, you're wrong, absolutely wrong. The last thing I want to hear is more advice about Harry."

"If you don't want to discuss Harry, what do you want to discuss?" he asked patiently.

"I'll tell you what I want to say." She looked away from him. She didn't want it to seem that she was accusing him. "Don't let Father take any of his money out of securities. He's got so little. He can't afford to lose it."

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"You wouldn't approve of his turning three shillings into a pound?" he asked her, smiling.

"Not if there's any chance at all of his losing the three shillings."

"Hester, your father has set his heart on making money. He's decided the quickest way to do it is by gambling on the stock exchange. Do you think it better that I should handle the business for him, or would you sooner he went into the jungle alone? Tell me honestly, Hester, what you think?" He stood smiling at her, both hands in his pockets, his brown face serious behind the smile.

She hesitated. "I'd sooner he didn't gamble at all."

"But if he means to?"

"Then—then I suppose it would be better if you helped him," she said in a troubled voice.

"I'm glad you say that, Hester, because if you didn't trust me I—well, I couldn't bear to come here. Now, I'll tell you the truth, Hester. When people set out to make money quickly, there is no absolute certainty. High returns are only a reward for being prepared to risk your capital. If you have private information, as I have in this case, the risk is very much less, but it does exist. I'm risking everything I have, but you are quite right to dissuade your father."

Hester considered this. It sounded like a very reassuring statement, until she remembered that she hadn't managed to influence her father in any way.

"I hate money," she said, exhausted. "I think I'll slash away at those roses now."

Prudence was tidying up the sitting room when Hester came in.

"I've emptied the ash trays," she said in a resigned voice. "If only people didn't smoke we shouldn't have to do anything in here for weeks but draw the curtains and throw out the newspapers. Even that makes me feel like Cinderella," she added pointedly. "What's wrong, Hester? You're looking odd."

"It's Maurice."

"Maurice? What on earth's wrong with Maurice? I should have thought he was the only one round here not to worry about. After all, we have Morgan, and Jackie, and Harry."

"Harry keeps saying he's trying to get Father's money."

"I've listened to them and it always sounds as if he's trying not to get Father's money."

"Harry says that's how all the best confidence men behave."

"Harry seems to know a lot about crime."

"Stop trying to be funny," Hester begged. "I don't think innocent people get followed. Oh, I forgot, you don't know about that. There was a man hiding in the garden last night. I had a long talk with him and he told me he was following Maurice."

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"Action at last," Prudence said with satisfaction. "Things have been getting a bit boring round here. Won't it be wonderful if Maurice is really an international criminal? Do you think he has anything to do with atom bombs?"

"I don't think it's funny. He may be hiding in the garden now, or the wood."

"I'll look," Prudence said eagerly. "Anything rather than make the beds."

She rushed out of the room. She didn't want to be stopped to listen to interminable discussions about caution and correct behavior. She was still armed in complete innocence, and was afraid of no one.

She turned into the woods, and became a little excited at the thought that a murderer might be hiding behind the trees. She walked cautiously under the deep green ceiling of leaves until she came within sight of the ruined chapel. A man was sitting in one corner, apparently slumped in sleep. He might be dead, she thought, and was carried toward him on a wave of fear.

"Hello, Prudence," Harry said, opening his eyes.

"Harry, what on earth are you doing here so early?" she said in exasperation.

"I've been walking around for a long time, brushing the dew with urgent feet."

"You weren't. You were sleeping."

"I wasn't sleeping. I was composing a poem."

"I don't believe it."

"Shall I tell you why you're so aggressive toward me, Prudence?"

Prudence sighed and raised her eyes to the tops of the trees, a monument to patience, preparing to be incredulous.

"It's because you're too young. When you're older, you'll find that most men are as monotonous as steam hammers. When you've been battered by a hundred thousand soporific words from jolly decent chaps, you'll yearn for my company. But I shan't be there. I believe in moving on."

Their talk was interrupted by someone coming toward them through the woods. It was Morgan. He stopped by one of the broken walls, and waited, listening. Then he moved onto the ruined stone floor and knelt down. He was half sheltered by the wall, and they could no longer see him.

"I'm going home now," Prudence said clearly.

She walked toward the chapel. "Good morning, Morgan," she said.

He jumped up.

"Hello, Prudence. Hello, Hello, Prudence," he said in an agitated voice. "I—came here—I can't stand the house when that little crook's in it. He's still there, is he, Prudence? Has your father sent for the police?" He was talking wildly.

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"Jackie's very useful. I don't think it would be fair to send for the police," she said sternly.

"It's the only way to treat—people like that," Morgan gasped. He was in a state of such agitation that Prudence wondered if he was ill, but as he was always pretending to be ill it followed that he must be in perfect health.

Harry came through the trees, said good morning to them both with an air of gravity, and sat down on one of the walls.

Morgan turned to him, with the hatred a hunchback might feel for a jeering boy.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded passionately.

"I was wondering if I'd take up archaeology. Some of those old wool merchants may have been buried in a golden fleece," Harry said, looking speculatively at the stone floor.

Morgan was suddenly transformed. He dropped his shoulders and lowered his head. He looked much smaller, and as malevolent as a weasel about to spring on a rabbit.

"Stay away from here. Stay out of the wood and away from the house. Get out of my reach," he advised.

"Why don't you have the law on me?" Harry said insolently.

Prudence began to back away.

"Harry, come on," she said in an urgent voice.

Neither paid any attention.

"Get away. Quickly," Morgan said in a flat voice.

Harry, with apparent difficulty, began to fumble at his pocket, Prudence and Morgan watched him. The article, whatever it was stuck in his pocket. In the end it took him two hands to produce it.

"Now," he said to Morgan with satisfaction, and held out the small, polished gun, as though he was offering it for inspection. He withdrew it quickly, and balanced it on his knee.

"Don't be so violent, Morgan," he said in a reproving voice.

Morgan seemed to ignore the gun. "Are you going?" he asked.

Harry looked at Prudence, and smiled, like a performer who has finished his act and waits for the applause.

"Certainly," he said, and rose, tossing the gun from hand to hand, and walked away.

Morgan sank down on the wall and wiped his brow. Once again, he looked like a sick man.

"Don't worry your father with any of this," he advised. "Tomorrow I'm flying to Ireland. By the time I come back Harry will have gone away. There will be no more trouble. I'll be glad when I'm on that plane."

Prudence continued to look at him with her candid, suspicious stare.

"Let's get back to the house," he said irritably.

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Harry found Hester beside the rose garden. She wore gloves, and carried a basket and scissors.

"You look deliciously Edwardian," he told her lazily. "Are you sure you're not going to begin trilling 'Today I'm gathering posies of roses, roses, And all the other flowers That fill the happy hours'? Enter chorus, pursued by bevy of young peers. If we'd lived fifty years ago, Hester, I'd have pelted you with the family jewels. I'll find diamonds for you still. I promise you. Now sit down, and I'll cut the flowers."

He took the scissors from her.

"Here's a pure white rosebud, for the first year of your life, when you crawled about in waterproof pants with not an impure thought in your head, apart from a deep Freudian desire to murder your parents. And here's one with a tinge of pink—that's when you were two, and smeared your frock with jam. Then we'll have some red ones, for the dark ages up to seven, when infant feet stamp and infant faces turn dark with fury. Then we proceed in a pale rose and cream through the years of fantasy. Roses don't come in purple. I can't do you as a brooding adolescent. I shall have to take the deepest red I can find. Now we'll have the white coffee roses, and the very pale cream, for tenderness and delicacy and all the charms combined. That's twenty. Am I right?"

"Harry, I didn't mean you to take so many. You've left none at all. The garden will be bare."

"Accept the rosebuds while ye may. One for each year of your life, to emphasize the moral."

She took them from him gravely, trying to conceal the sudden surging expectations she felt in her veins.

"I'll take them in," she said in a low voice.

"And then?"

"I'm going to the village," she said, over her shoulder.

"May I come with you?" he asked, looking at her with his eager, pathetic smile.

"Oh, yes."

She went quickly to the house with the flowers and arranged them in the wide blue vase. She put them on a low table by the window, and drew one curtain, so that the sun shouldn't blight her twenty years too quickly.

She went into the garden again. Harry was waiting.

"You mustn't talk to me about Maurice," she warned him.

"I'm not interested in Maurice at all. It's Morgan that fills my thoughts."

"Why? Why do you think so much about Morgan? Have you met him somewhere before?"

"No."

"I wish you wouldn't be so mysterious. You know something about Morgan. He said last night he'd been in South Africa, and I

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think that's the first thing I've heard about his past life. Did you meet him in South Africa?"

"I've never set foot in any part of Africa. I have to avoid places with colored populations. I'm a poor white by nature. I'll tell you about Morgan when the time comes."

She looked at him with deep uneasiness.

"Don't do anything—rash. I feel—I keep feeling something terrible's going to happen."

"Perhaps it is," he suggested. "Has your father parted with his money yet?"

She was so sad and angry she was afraid she was going to cry. She caught one hand in the other, and dug her nails into her own flesh.

"If you think it's funny," she said over her shoulder.

"Don't walk so fast. I think it's serious. But if it wasn't your father, I'd stand back and enjoy the comedy."

She was outraged. "Comedy!"

"Yes, comedy. The man with money who's determined to lose it in order to get more. It's one of the classic situations. The newspapers thrive on it, and there must be thousands of people whose vanity keeps them out of court."

"So you enjoy the ruin of innocent people?"

"Well, innocent of what?" he inquired reasonably. "Greed? Covetousness? A desire to enjoy the benefits of money they've never worked for? No confidence man ever got a penny out of anyone who wasn't dreaming of easy money."

She didn't answer, and he walked quickly until he was alongside her again.

"Hester, you're crying."

"Go away."

"I have a handkerchief," he said eagerly, pulling one from his pocket. He looked at it reminiscently. "No, perhaps this one won't do. I have another handkerchief." He felt in his pockets, and finally produced a blue handkerchief, still in its virgin folds.

She began to laugh. "It isn't like you, Harry, to have two handkerchiefs."

"I've had my laundry done," he said, dabbing tenderly at her cheeks. "But I suppose you want to blow your nose. Oh, well, clean handkerchiefs can't last forever."

"Harry, why are you so horrid about Father?"

"I'm not. It's just that I see him as a natural victim. How did Maurice get on to him in the first place?"

"When we had the antique shop. Maurice came in and bought something—I think it was a table. And Father brought him home to lunch."

"That's how it would be," Harry said with satisfaction. "Your father not only attracts calamities,

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he asks them home to lunch. Talking about lunch . . ."

"I wasn't talking about lunch," Hester interrupted angrily. When I came out I didn't want to talk about anything."

"Then don't let's talk," Harry said in a strained voice. "It will get us nowhere. Nothing will. We're on a ball, being bowled through emptiness to eternal silence. We're only pieces of animated dust. Why should we try to hurl our squeaking voices through the universe?"

Hester was frightened. His face was empty and his eyes looked blind. She felt he was sinking away from her: she wasn't prepared to let him go. She caught his head to her and kissed him, and after a second of emptiness he responded. They held on to each other for a moment, and then, by a common impulse of self-preservation, separated again.

Hester was exhilarated. She felt like a driver whose brakes had failed at a point of danger and who had miraculously survived. She would proceed more carefully now.

They walked on toward the village, closer in their thoughts than most people, but each still utterly confused by the behavior of the other.

Hester looked at her watch.

"Is there something I could do to help you?" Harry asked. "What do you have to buy?"

"Some buttons and some white silk."

"These be feminine mysteries. Anything else?"

"And some coffee from Mad Meg's. That's all."

"Give me the money and I'll get the coffee."

"Here you are. A pound note and a pound of coffee."

When they came to the village Hester went into the threatening darkness of the draper's shop. Harry went on to the grocer's. It was a good shop, smelling of incompatible foods.

"Delicious," he said approvingly, while the old woman behind the counter snuffled and mewed.

"A pound of coffee, if you please," he barked suddenly, like a bad-tempered squire.

"What kind?" she shrilled back.

"How should I know what kind? It's for Miss Wade, of Tower House. Surely you know what your own customers buy."

"A pound of best coffee," she muttered.

"Well, naturally."

He walked round the shop, examining. "Cheese?" he said absently. "What kind of cheese do they like? I suppose I'd better take one of those things wrapped in silver paper. Do you know," he added more genially, "I'm sure you'd find it worth your while to keep real cheese. Throw in a

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pound of tomatoes, and some plain biscuits. And charge it all up."

"Miss Wade always pays," she croaked.

"Well, today she wants it charged up," Harry said.

He met Hester in the street.

"Here's your coffee," he said. "Six shillings—or was it seven? Anyway, I can't give you the change at this very moment. I should have paid with your pound instead of my own money. So either I give you back the pound and you owe me seven shillings, or you come into the pub for a drink and I'll get the pound changed and give you back—what did I say?—thirteen shillings."

Hester looked confused. "But I don't want a drink, Harry."

"No drink, no change. Be a good girl. A sherry before lunch will set you up." He took hold of her elbow and steered her into the Running Fox.

"Harry, I know you're short of money. You don't have to buy me a drink."

"I want to give you the change from the coffee."

"But Harry, there are other ways of changing a pound."

"I can't imagine what they are," he said. "Sit down by that table and I'll bring the drinks. What do you want? Sherry? Beer?"

"Ginger-beer shandy," she said, and he walked over to the bar. He looked happy and relaxed. He liked having enough money to buy a girl a drink.

In the corner, dark against the dark paneling, a young man was sitting, with a glass of beer and a newspaper in front of him. Hester looked at him idly. He had a dark, strong face that could have been called insolent. He looked like a man to whom the idea of subservience had never occurred. She studied him, thinking not so much of him as of Harry, realizing with pain that Harry was soft where this man and others were hard; that Harry had no pride while this man probably had too much; that Harry was weak, unpredictable, and perhaps even dishonest.

When Harry came back with the drinks she turned to him with a loving, protective smile, and accepted the shandy from him as though it had been a gift of flowers.

"I like this pub," Harry said. "Four hundred years old, and only three landlords in all that time, if the present one hits the average. Take a look at him—do you suppose he's more than a hundred and thirty-three and a third years old? Your health, Hester!" The last words were spoken with a desperate sincerity that seemed to give the act of drinking a unique importance.

He put down his empty glass, sighing. "I think I'll get another."

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"Drink up that shandy, Hester," he said upon returning. "I shall love you even when you're an old woman with dropsy. Don't look frightened. It's not true. You'll grow old like someone out of Yeats. A few minutes of lovely memories, then a graceful death with epitaphs in every anthology. But you must love me if you want to be sure of getting in the anthologies. Hester, love me and I'll write you a book of poems all to yourself. And I'll do breathing exercises before the window every morning." He began to breathe deeply, then bent down to lift imaginary weights and heave them above his head. The dark young man looked up from his newspaper and the old landlord leaned across the bar and gave an amazed, yelping laugh. Harry, as usual, was failing to be inconspicuous.

Hester didn't notice the others. She had begun to laugh.

"Would you be the ideal husband?" she asked teasingly.

"You would have no pleasure then in reforming me. Would you like to try?"

"I'll think about it," she said lightly. She stood up, frightened by the realization that she was thinking about it very seriously. Life with Harry would have its compensations, and she saw with absolute clarity that if no one helped him his talent would dissolve in easy words and idleness. By asking for her help he was making her responsible for his own irresponsibility. She didn't want to marry; like a young fish, she needed all the ocean to swim in before she returned to the small pools of the river. Harry was lost, bewildered, drifting. She wanted to lead him out of the darkness.

"Harry, I must go. I must go now. Good-by."

She walked out. She had forgotten to ask for the change from the coffee.

The young man in the corner watched Hester go, then walked over to Harry.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" he asked.

"No."

"Will you have a drink with me?"

"Bitter, please."

The stranger went to the bar and came back with the drinks, giving one to Harry.

"I thought I heard a note in your voice that suggested you'd been in Australia," he explained.

"I found it ravishing," Harry said solemnly. "But I had to leave. It wasn't the place for my profession."

"Which is?"

"I'm a poet."

"I'll be damned!" the Australian said. He looked intently at Harry, as though he were memorizing him for an examination.

"You may photograph me, if

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you wish," Harry said modestly.

"Do you make much money out of poetry?" the Australian said, looking now at Harry's shabby coat, whose cuffs were so unsuitably bound with leather.

"Only decimal points," Harry said. "Do you make much money out of Australia?"

"In good years, yes. I'm in the farm-machinery business."

"Have you been buying many combine harvesters here?" Harry asked, waving his already empty glass at the empty pub. "Or is it culture that brings you to the Cotswolds?"

"I was watching you and your sister," the stranger said in level tones.

"It must have been with the inward eye," Harry said. "I haven't got a sister."

"The girl who was here with you. I thought I recognized her voice."

"Her name is Hester Wade. She's the girl I'm going to marry, eventually," Harry said, making up his mind. Drink was clearing his head.

"Is a man called Maurice Reid going to be one of the guests?"

"In a way, I like being pumped," Harry said. "It makes me feel important, like a spy being interviewed by the secret police. But there's another side of me, longing to discuss astronomy, or bird watching. Suppose you tell me, without what you may believe to be elaborate finesse, exactly what you want to know. Roll all your questions up into one ball and tear the answers with rough strife through the iron gates of life."

"Are you trying to be funny?" the stranger asked truculently. "No, I see, it rhymed. Did you make it up?"

"I adapted it to the needs of the moment."

The stranger looked grimly at Harry, then made a quick decision. "I'll tell you what I want to know. Have the Wades much money? Do they trust Maurice Reid? Is he planning to swindle them? If he is, when's he going to do it?"

"The Wades have very little money. They once had more. The sooner they lose what they have, the better; then the long agony of parting will be over. Hester's father thinks he has the Midas touch, but what he has is the reverse. All his gold turns into porridge and roses. Maurice has gilt edges to him and is now going to sell him some kind of illuminated address to Australian oil, before melting into the trees and never being heard of again. That's my estimate of the situation," Harry said cheerfully.

"And you haven't tried to interfere?" the stranger asked contemptuously.

"What have you got against Maurice?" Harry asked.

The Australian stood up. His

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face was dark and desperate, like a man trapped in the mountains in a thunderstorm.

"I'd sooner shake a snake by the hand than come within speaking distance of him," he said. "If I get a chance I'll twist him till his back breaks."

Harry looked at him with bright excited eyes. "Have another drink, you—what's your name?"

"Marryatt. I'll eat before I drink any more. You ought to do the same," he said, without interest.

"I'm eating under a haystack today. Cheese, biscuits, and the beauties of nature."

Throughout the afternoon the sun blazed down until the flowers buckled in the heat and all the dogs walked with their tongues hanging out. Hester lay down in the shade. In the valley below, a tractor muttered; the bees that worked beside her in the flowers made a more important noise; she had no troubles and no worries; she fell asleep.

When she woke Jackie was standing beside her, looking underfed and overworked.

"I've polished the silver, Miss, would you want me to help in the garden?" he asked accusingly.

She sat up, remembering guiltily that she had meant to send for the police. He looked very young to go to prison.

"Yes, Jackie, you could begin to weed that flower bed over there," she said sharply.

She heard the phone ring, and wavered for a moment before going in.

Morgan was creeping through the hall, looking nervously at the telephone.

"Where's that little crook?" he asked.

"He's in the garden, the back garden."

Morgan turned and went quickly through the front door. Hester picked up the telephone.

"Miss Wade? Are you the girl I talked to in the garden last night?"

"Yes. Are you—I don't know your name."

"My name's Tom Marryatt. Now, look, I don't want to interfere in anyone's business, and you can tell me where to go, if you like. I'm trying to do the straight thing. I should have done it last night. I've been talking to your friend. I know this Maurice Reid. If he's trying to get any money out of your family don't let him get away with it. That's all I have to say and I'll say it in any way I choose. Good-by."

"How do you know? Wait, wait!" Hester said, but he had rung off.

She put back the receiver, and went listlessly out into the garden. The lush, hot afternoon was only oppressive now. She knew she must have a discussion with

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her father, and that he would treat her like an importunate child who had come to ask him to draw cows and horses on the backs of envelopes.

She thought of going to Prudence for support, but Prudence was too young and superior. Harry—Harry would never be any kind of help about money. She had to manage this interview alone, without help from anyone.

She found her father in the little room that was fictitiously described as his study. He had a notebook in his hand, and was consulting it with apparent satisfaction.

"I want to speak to you about money, Father," she said sadly.

"Money, Hester?" he said, assuming surprise.

"Father, please don't invest any money in this scheme of Maurice's," Hester said in a distressed voice.

"My dear Hester, you must know that Maurice and I wouldn't make any arrangement without considering it very, very carefully beforehand. If we decide that my money is to be invested in this concern, you may be sure it's ninety-nine per cent certain that the money will be safe. In fact, you may be certain that the sterling cast upon the waters will come back quadrupled," he said with a smile of innocent delight.

"I'm convinced you shouldn't do it, Father."

"Hester, you're too young to know anything about money," he said impatiently. "You mustn't trouble your head about the things you can't understand. Now, don't look at me like that, Hester. I repeat that you know nothing about money. What are equity shares?" he asked. He waited, holding back his triumph.

"I don't know. But I don't believe it's difficult to know. I could find out in five minutes."

"Hester, I will try to forgive you, because you are young, and, as I have already demonstrated, know nothing about money. But this discussion is over. Do you understand? Over. Now run along like a good girl before we really quarrel."

"Father, I won't run along. If you give this money to Maurice you may not get it back."

"Hester, are you trying to tell me that you distrust Maurice? Maurice!" he repeated, with a dramatic blend of pain and incredulity.

She closed her eyes, trying not to be irritated by his affectations, reminding herself that he was a good man.

"I don't know what I feel about Maurice," she said unhappily. "Harry's always saying that Maurice—that Maurice means to have your money."

"Harry! You mean that you are prepared to take the word of that—that worthless loafer, that par-

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asite, against Maurice!" He stood up, and walked irresolutely to the door.

"He's not a worthless loafer, he's a poet!" Hester said angrily.

"Maurice, whatever his faults may be, is a man. That is not how I describe Harry."

"Please, please, please don't talk about Harry any more. And it's not just Harry. There's this man I met in the garden last night. And now he's telephoned to warn me against Maurice."

"A man you met in the garden? A stranger, trespassing in our garden, has telephoned. Hester, are you mad?"

"I'm not mad. He telephoned."

"Who is this man?"

"I don't know. He sounds like an Australian, or something. He's called Marryatt."

"An Australian. And where may I ask, does this stranger from Australia live?"

"I don't know. Perhaps Harry could tell us. He's been talking to Harry," Hester said incautiously.

"Talking to Harry! Well, that certainly explains everything. Talking to Harry! And I suppose he gets his facts about Maurice from Harry. Oh, this is very convincing. Where can I get hold of this stranger?"

"I don't know."

"That's just as well for him," he said, almost shouting. "Because if I could meet him I would knock him down. Let me tell you, I trust Maurice. I trust him absolutely. And trust him all the more because spongers and troublemakers and lunatics from Australia maliciously interfere in my business. Now will you listen to me, Hester? You are not to see or speak to Harry again. He is a wastrel. And I forbid, I positively forbid you to speak to strangers in the garden. If I find a stranger in the garden I will shoot him. Do you understand? Now please leave the room. I'm expecting Maurice."

"Oh, I'll be glad when it's time to go back to London," Hester said, beginning to cry. She rushed out of the room to the hall.

The gate that led to Tower House was unpainted and had the same derelict, sagging appearance as the house itself. The young man had been examining the house for half an hour.

"Hell, it would be better to tear the whole place down and begin again," he said contemptuously to himself, and felt in his pocket for another cigarette. He heard the car coming, and took his hand slowly from his pocket. He stepped back into the cover of the trees and waited until the car drew up before the gate. Then he stepped forward.

"Don't bother, I'll open the gate," he said. He looked into the car. "Well, if it isn't Maurice Reid, my old friend," he said with enormous satisfaction.

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Maurice looked at him, with a humorous, apologetic lift of the eyebrows. He took his hands from the wheel, and tucked the rosebud in his buttonhole back into place.

"I'm afraid I don't know you. I think you've made a mistake."

"A mistake? I've seen your face over my bed every night for years. Sometimes I see it very small and dream of stamping on it until the filthy grin is squashed as flat as a frog under a tractor; and sometimes I see it very big, springing backward and forward like a punching ball every time I hit it."

"Open the door," the young man said. "We're going for a drive."

"I'm afraid—I'm in a hurry—you can't get in my car."

"Take your hands away from the wheel or I'll break your arm. Open the door."

Maurice leaned across and opened the door. "If you insist," he said, smiling.

The stranger stepped in quickly, and slammed the door. "Now we'll go for our ride. Somewhere quiet. Back into the road again, turn right, keep going for about half a mile, then you'll find a lane to pull into. You can stop there. Get on with it now. I'll talk."

Maurice put the car in reverse and wavered backward away from the gate. He looked once at the other man and smiled with a kind of humorous resignation.

"I haven't made up my mind if I'm going to break your neck or only beat you up," the stranger said. "Turn right, now. I don't know what satisfaction there would be in beating you up. I've thought about it a lot. You wouldn't fight back. It would be like hitting a woman. But I may do it."

"I think you're mad," Maurice said. "Before God, I swear I don't know you."

"My name is Marryatt."

"I've never known anyone called Marryatt."

"My mother married twice."

Maurice stopped the car and leaned back in his seat. "I can't drive on," he said in an exhausted voice.

"Ask what my mother's name was."

"No."

"Don't you want to hear it?"

"Why should I know her?"

"You were going to marry her once. Now tell me her name."

"I don't know it. I don't know it. Leave me alone."

"Tell me her name. You were going to marry her, but first you took all her money, to invest for her. You took her money and went away. Now tell me her name."

"For God's sake, I don't know it. You're mad."

"Then tell me the names of all the women you've been going to marry."

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Maurice didn't answer.

"Have there been too many?"

Maurice shook his head.

"Get out of the car. I said get out of the car."

Maurice sat still.

The other man hit him on the face with the back of his hand. Maurice got out of the car.

"Now tell me her name."

"I don't know it." He looked down at his feet, where his long, sunset shadow started across the road, and the other shadow bent grotesquely and swung its gibbon arm. He turned to run and was hit on the side of the head as he turned. He fell and was picked up again.

"My mother's name. Now, or I'll kick you till you can't speak," he said.

"She was called Fletcher, was she?" Maurice asked, choking. "Yes. She had a son."

"Go on."

"She had a son at school. It was a long time ago. Ten, twelve years ago. I don't think I ever met him."

"Oh, yes you did. It was twelve years ago. I was fifteen. I only saw you twice. You took every pound she had. Do you think I'd forget you? Then she was ill, and a year later she died. Did you know that? Did you know you were a murderer? What did you do with the money?"

"Let me go," Maurice said, gasping. "I'll give it back."

"What did you do with the money? You left Australia. Where did you go?"

"I went—I went to Mexico."

"How long did you stay there?"

"A year. No, six months."

"Just for a holiday?"

"No. No. Yes, for a holiday," he said hopelessly.

"You killed her so that you could have a year's holiday in Mexico?" He stopped, listening. They heard the grunt and the whine of an old car tackling the hill.

"Someone's coming," Maurice said, in gratitude.

"Get in the car and drive on."

Maurice swayed on his feet, then he threw himself down on the grass shoulder, with his hands under his face.

Marryatt listened, then looked at Maurice's car, where it stood in the middle of the narrow road.

"You'll have to move that car of yours," he said roughly to Maurice. "We'll continue this conversation later. I'll have decided by then what I'm going to do with you."

He picked Maurice up, pushed him over to the car, and seated him on the running board. The other car coughed toward them and stopped. The fat woman who drove it looked angrily at the obstructing car, then curiously at the two men. Maurice was still white and trembling and his clothes were powdered with dust. The man who stood over him turned

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round to glare at her, then vaulted the fence and walked quickly across the field through the scattering sheep.

The fat woman opened her handbag, took out a compact, and began to powder her hot, heavy face with ill-tempered jabs of the powder puff.

"Could you please move your car?" she shouted to Maurice. "Or can't you move it? Have you had an accident?"

Maurice stood up wearily. "Oh, go to hell, will you?" he said to her.

She began to tremble, like a dislodged rock on the edge of a precipice. She dragged her handbag for a weapon, found a pencil, and scored the number XAW5116 on paper.

Maurice's wavering hand at last succeeded in opening the door of his car. He toppled into the seat like a wounded man levering himself into a moving ambulance, then began to make futile gestures of apology to the fat woman. He started the engine; when he had moved the car to the side of the road he was able to give her his charming, deprecatory smile.

"I apologize," he called to her, "I wasn't feeling well."

She snapped her bag shut. "I know your kind," she shouted as she drove away.

Maurice arrived at the Tower House twenty minutes later. There was no dust on his clothes. His hair was brushed, and he looked once again clean, shrewd, quizzical.

Wade went down the steps from the door to meet him.

"Maurice," he said in relief. "I was beginning to be afraid you weren't coming."

Prudence was in the kitchen, staring grimly at a cookery book. She looked up without interest when Jackie came in.

"I found this on the floor, Miss," Jackie said virtuously. He groped in his pocket and produced sixpence. "Where shall I put it?"

"Up on that shelf. We'd better get a move on. Dinner's going to be terribly complicated tonight, and I'm going out afterward."

"Aw, give them baked beans on toast. What's wrong with that? And stewed apples if you want to follow with something fancy. Then we can sit down and put our feet up."

"Baked beans?"

"Yes. Open a tin. Two tins if you like."

"It wouldn't do," Prudence said. She looked with distaste at the oil stove. "Or perhaps it would. No, it wouldn't be right."

"Then I'll fry the cod nice and brown and make some chips. That's right. I said chips. You've heard of them, haven't you?"

"Jackie, what a good idea!" Prudence said, abandoning all her

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ideas about cookery as a fine art.

"Here, wait a minute, Miss. I got something for you," Jackie said. He plunged in his pocket again, and brought out a silver-colored brooch with some shining stones in the middle. "Here, have this," he said casually.

Prudence stopped and took it from his hand.

"Where did you get it?"

"I bought it at Woolworth's. Do you think it's pretty? Anyway, you have it. I don't want it." He turned his back on her and began to whistle.

"Jackie, how much did it cost?"

"I don't know."

"If you bought it at Woolworth's it wouldn't be more than half a crown, would it? Will it be O.K. if I give you half a crown?"

"I don't want any money for it," Jackie said, his face glowing with the sweet radiance of generosity.

"Then I can't have it," Prudence said regretfully.

"It makes no odds. If you won't have it, you won't," Jackie said. He looked abject and bewildered, like a waif who had been thrown out of a churchyard where he had come to lay flowers on a grave.

"I've hurt your feelings, Jackie," Prudence said.

"You haven't hurt m'feelings. I've no feelings. I had them kicked out of me before I was twelve."

"Jackie, I'm going to a dance tonight. Could I borrow that brooch? I'd be terribly grateful, and I promise to give it back in the morning."

"In the morning?" Jackie said. He laughed satirically. "You borrow it, Miss. It makes no odds to me."

Prudence took the brooch and went upstairs to get ready for the party.

Morgan came out of his bedroom door as she walked across the landing.

"Who's that?" he called.

"It's me. Prudence."

"I thought it might be Harry," he said, beginning to retreat into his bedroom again. "He's always creeping around, spying on me. Is he in the house, Prudence? Is Harry in the house?"

"Morgan, I have to get ready for a party." She ran past him and into Hester's bedroom.

Hester was sitting on the bed, doing nothing.

"There's something wrong with Morgan. Go and shut him up, Hester."

Hester went over to the dressing table and began to brush her hair.

"Please, Hester, don't bother about your hair now. Please do something about Morgan."

Hester put down the hairbrush and went to the door.

"And Jackie's making baked beans for dinner," Prudence called after her.

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Hester tapped on Morgan's door.

"Are you coming down to dinner, Morgan?"

"No."

"But you didn't have any lunch, Morgan."

"Come in, Hester, if you're alone."

Hester opened the door and looked in. Morgan was sitting in his outdoor coat, holding a brief case on his knees. In the diminished daylight, he looked very pale.

"I wondered if you were all right," Hester said weakly.

"Is Harry in the house?" he asked.

"I'm not quite sure," she said apologetically.

"I'm not leaving my room while he is in the house."

"But Harry won't do you any harm."

"You be a good girl and get him out of the house for me. And keep him out. He's getting on my nerves. And I'll tell you someone else who's on my nerves," he said, suddenly beginning to shout. "That little crook who came last night. Why didn't you send for the police? Can you tell me that? Is your father in this too?"

"Morgan!" She turned to leave.

"Oh, Hester, don't go," he said, watching her in terror.

She stopped, in compunction. "Morgan, you're not well."

"I'm all right," he muttered.

"You'll come down to dinner, won't you? It isn't good to be alone too much."

"Alone," he said, and sighed in relief as the word escaped him, as though he had managed at last to make his confession. "I'll tell you something, now. I've been alone for two years and two months. All that time I've been hiding from them. Now there's Harry, and there's this little crook, and tomorrow there will be more. Perhaps they'll be here tonight. I've been frightened to leave the country, but I'm going to do it at last, Hester. Tomorrow I'll be in Ireland, if I have the luck. But I don't feel lucky, Hester. I'm telling you these things because I trust you, not because I've been drinking. I can drink twice as much as I've had tonight and still keep my mouth shut. Hester, if I gave you something, you'd look after it? Would you? You wouldn't let anyone know?"

"I don't know," she said reluctantly.

"Just take it and hide it for me?"

"It would depend what it was."

"I thought so. You'd try to find out what it was. There's no one I can trust, you see."

"I think I hear Maurice's car."

"It was bad enough before, but now they'll all be after me. He'll send for them all. If I try to go they'll stop me. If I stay here, they'll come. Hester, you'll do one thing for me?" He felt in his

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pockets and brought out a wallet. "Take this money and give it to Ferguson."

"To Uncle Joe?"

"Yes, for my seat in that plane tomorrow. I don't want there to be any doubt about that. You give him the money. Give it to him tonight. Do you promise?"

Hester took the money. "I promise," she said. She was glad to be able to do something for him.

She went out of the room and stood quietly on the stairs. She wondered if it was too late to help Prudence dress for the party. She had decided to turn back to her own room when she heard Maurice's voice, low and easy, speaking into the telephone in the hall below.

"Joe? About this plane you've chartered for Ireland. What do you mean by a stiff price? Oh, I see. Is it too late to get a fourth passenger? . . . Someone interested in drinking and horses. Why not Harry? Oh, I didn't know you felt like that. Where shall we meet? Oh, you're coming over tonight. Here, to the Wades'? I'll see you then. Good-by."

Hester went downstairs slowly. It was her duty to be polite to Maurice over the baked beans.

"Baked beans!" Maurice said. "By Jove, that takes me back! When I was a boy being starved at school I used to nip into a little place in the town and fill up on baked beans. I've loved them ever since!"

Hester smiled as though her face were being worked by electricity, while she wondered if real people ever said 'By Jove.' The feeling that Maurice was not real, that he was only someone she had read about in a book, was increasing. She looked at her father, who was examining the baked beans with genuine distress. He pushed his plate away.

"What comes next?" he asked in a voice that quivered with self-pity. "Something made with suet and jam, I suppose?"

Hester murmured that Prudence had gone to a party, and then sat in an oppressed silence until the segments of apple, floating in an ocean of sweetened water, had been borne triumphantly to the table by Jackie. She waited listlessly until they had finished, and then went quickly out of the room, out of the house, and into the garden.

She sat down in the shadow of the trees, and remained there while the world turned her slowly under the dark sky, and she let all thoughts of people drift away behind her.

A long time afterward, she heard her father calling to her.

He walked across the lawn toward the trees.

"Hester!" he called again.

"Yes, Father," she said, and came slowly toward him.

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"Hester, Uncle Joe is here. Will you come in?"

"Yes, Father."

"Hester, I hope you don't think I spoke too harshly to you this afternoon."

"It doesn't matter now, does it?"

"Don't hold it against me if I was a little hasty," he said, preparing to redefine his hastiness as logical and excusable conduct.

"Father, does it matter now?"

He sighed, and admitted the question at last.

"I've fixed things up with Maurice," he admitted, his voice suddenly full of doubt.

"You don't sound elated," she said coldly.

"But I am, Hester. It's for the sake of you girls that I've taken the risk," he said pathetically.

"I thought there was no risk." She began to move away, impatiently.

"Hester, do you think I've done the right thing?"

"I've told you what I think. Nothing's happened to make me change my mind."

He looked at her unhappily. It was too dark for him to see the expression on her face, and it is difficult for an indulged parent to realize when he has said something that his children will not forgive.

"You sound so hard. Not like my little girl Hester."

"I'm twenty. I can't go back to being a little girl." They were moving out of the shadows into the lights from the house. For the first time she saw his face.

"Don't look so sad, Father," she said impulsively, and his expression changed to gratitude. She caught his hand and squeezed it. He seemed overcome by an almost excessive emotion, but she suppressed the slightly irritable thought that older people yielded too readily to sentiment, and smiled at him affectionately, although she herself felt the hardness beneath her smile.

They went in the house together. Wade was so relieved to have captured her again that it was impossible for him to show instantly what he felt when he found Harry in the sitting room.

"Harry! How nice!" Hester said ironically. "Good evening, Moira, Uncle Joe!"

She sat down to listen.

"What I don't understand, Uncle Joe," Harry was saying in the confident voice of easy friendship, "is exactly why you are going to Dublin in Horse Show week. If you mean to buy a horse I can put you in touch with a man. He's a genius at the game. He'll sell you a horse with an Irish brogue, if that's what you want."

Joe looked at the carpet for strength.

"Why are you going to Ireland, Uncle Joe?" Hester asked quickly.

"Business. There's a man over

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there; he owns some cinemas, and he's looking under the *fauteuils* every night for television sets, so now he wants to have a nervous breakdown in Jamaica and I buy his cinemas. I have to go quickly because already he begins to draw television aerials by accident when he tries to sign his name. But Aer Lingus is booked up. Then I remember meeting a pilot with a plane to charter. In fact, it was you, Harry, who made me buy this pilot a drink at the Sheaf of Wheat."

"What, are you flying with old Lee?" Harry asked. "Why, I know him. Suppose I come along for the trip, as cabin boy or something?"

"When I met him with Harry," Joe explained to the others, "he gave me his card. If you ever want to charter a plane, he says, remember me. So I remember him. Then my directors are very annoying, and don't come. But the plane has only four seats, and now Morgan and Maurice come with me."

"Morgan!" Harry repeated.

"Maurice!" Hester said. "Oh, yes, I heard you on the phone."

"Maurice! I thought you had to be in London tomorrow?" Wade said uneasily.

"I had a sudden idea I'd like to see Dublin again," Maurice said lightly. "And there's nothing I have to do myself in London. I must give instructions to my broker. That's all." He glanced at his watch. "I know his home number. I'll go out and do it now, with your permission."

He walked out of the room.

Hester jumped up. "Morgan—Morgan gave me some money for you. I must get it." She hurried from the room, brushing past Maurice as he returned.

"I've telephoned London," he said. "That's fixed."

Harry followed her, and stood beside her in the dark hall.

She turned on him. "He's going away with Father's money. He won't come back. He'll go to Ireland, we'll never hear of him again. Be quiet. I don't want comfort. I want Father's money back again."

"There's a lot of worry about money. It may be easier in the end to have no money at all. It's a rash thing I'm doing, to try to change my manner of living just because I love you, Hester. It's for you I'm grossly interfering with things that would be better left alone. We'll have money to last a time," Harry said confidently.

Hester didn't listen. "I don't believe Maurice was telephoning his broker. I'd like to find out whom he was telephoning," she said fiercely, looking at Harry, trying to force the thought from her head to his.

"You could ask the Exchange."

"Oh, no," she protested in a shocked voice, still looking at him intently.

"Your standards are too high,"

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he said ironically, and she saw that he understood that she was begging him to do what she wouldn't do herself. "It seems that by having no moral qualities at all I'm just the man you want. A little spying will leave my self-respect quite intact."

He went to the telephone. "Hello, Operator? I want to find out how much that call to London cost. All right, I'll hang on." He turned back to Hester, still holding the telephone. "You didn't tell me Morgan was going to Ireland. I'm not sure, Hester, but will you mind if I leave you for a couple of days? I think I'll have to be on that plane myself. There's the money question again. Do you suppose your father would like to lend me fifteen pounds?"

"No, Harry, I'm sure he wouldn't."

"Well, I can hardly borrow it from Morgan. I want it to be a surprise for him to find I'm on that plane too. I want to stick as close to him as the hairs on the back of his neck."

"Why are you so interested in Morgan? Everyone in this house is mad," she said despairingly.

Harry swung back to the phone. "Hello, Operator. What? No calls to London, no trunk calls from this number. You're certain? Well, thanks."

He hung the receiver back. "Got that?" he asked Hester. "Now things are heating up. I'll ring old Lee and tell him I'm flying with him tomorrow. I might as well get that bit fixed before I begin to worry about how to raise the money."

Hester was lost in a labyrinth of futile plans. She decided that she must attack Maurice at once, in front of them all; that it would be better to wait by his car and confront him alone. She heard Harry's voice explaining to someone at the other end of the line that he was flying in the plane tomorrow, but she didn't stay to listen. She fetched the money Morgan had given her and went back to the sitting room with it. Harry had finished his phone call, and was sitting now in a chair close to Moira's.

"Cheltenham is a fine monument to the limited liability company," Joe was saying. "Moira wants to spend the day there. She's driving me in early tomorrow, and then I take the train to Brickford."

"Shall I come with you for the ride?" Harry asked. "Or will you lend me one of your other cars? To get to the airport."

"The other cars are in London. Did you say airport, Harry?"

"Yes. I was thinking of flying with you, when I get the money."

"Yes, Harry, when you get the money you shall fly with me," Joe agreed quickly. "But this trip is business. I should like you to come, Harry, but when I make up my

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accounts it is necessary they should be exact. So if you give me the money tonight, you shall come tomorrow."

"You mean that?" Harry asked, grinning.

"Of course. When you have paid the money, I shall be so happy to have your company," Joe said heavily.

There was a tap at the door, and Jackie's voice was heard to ask meekly if anything else was wanted.

"Come in, Jackie, and show your shirt," Harry called, taking on himself readily, as usual, the duties of the head of the household.

Jackie came in meekly, and stood with his eyes downcast. Hester thought for a moment she saw triumph in his face.

"That's a wonderful shirt," Harry said. He stood up lazily and went to the blue vase that stood on the table. He took out two roses and tucked them into one of Jackie's buttonholes. Jackie stood meekly, like a child being prepared for the Sunday School play in the church hall.

"Flowers to add to the garden of your shirt," Harry said.

Jackie's face became very pinched. "I heard you had a sense of humor," he said. He looked humbly at Hester. "They're very pretty, Miss," he said. He peered down at the roses. "I never had a chance to have a garden. Never saw nothing but parks and don't touch the flowers before. I'll keep these," he said, touching the roses with one of his thick fingers. He walked softly out of the room.

Hester looked at Harry. This was the time to conceal absolutely the depths of her pain and disillusionment. She smiled fixedly, as though she were being photographed, while the memory of the morning in the garden blackened and withered. She saw that Harry's agile mind had danced away from the rose garden.

"You've given away two years of my life," she said to him, in a voice that was meant to be light, but that sounded instead hard and glittering, like granite.

Maurice looked up, smiling. "Roses mean England to me," he said, touching his rose with a gesture of affection that seemed to expose an inner man, untarnished by the bitter air of cities. "They grow them in other places," he added, in a tone that carefully mocked his own display of sentiment. "Have you ever been in Australia, Joe?"

"Never. And now you will tell me of the hanging gardens of Wagga Wagga," Joe said in a resigned voice. "I have never been in New Zealand, America, any part of Asia or Africa. In all these places you will tell me about the roses. You are a traveled man. I am at your mercy. How can I answer you? I have nothing to tell. I

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come of a family that travels only when it is forced to."

"I hope you're not being forced to go to Dublin," Maurice said easily.

"I am going for business," Joe said, watching Harry, who sat now on the arm of Moira's chair, with his hand an imperceptible inch from hers. "I'd give you a lift to Brickford, Maurice," Joe said, looking smoothly away again, "but I've told you I'm going to Cheltenham first with Moira," he said, speaking her name so loudly that she started up, with a movement that carried her fingers away from Harry's. "It would be too early for you," Joe said. "You probably prefer to drive yourself."

Maurice shook his head. "I shan't drive," he said. "You know the car isn't mine. I have a standing arrangement with Ames at the garage here to hire it when I'm down this way."

"I suppose you'll go by bus?" Hester inquired pleasantly.

"Yes," Maurice said. "If you'll excuse me for a moment I think I should telephone Ames at the garage. I'll ask him to pick up the car at my cottage tomorrow."

Hester considered the certainty that there was nothing to hold Maurice, not even a car, while she listened with an air of intelligent interest to Joe's instructions. "Ten fifteen at the Fairway Arms. The plane leaves at ten forty-five."

Harry followed Maurice out of the room, and she sat, watching her father's face. It wore his devout missionary aspect, as it usually did when he was thinking about money. She jumped up, saying something wild and inconsequential about Prudence, and ran out of the room.

In the dark hall she could barely see the two men.

"Oh, Hester, don't go away. I was explaining to Maurice if there was a pawnshop in the village my worries would be over. I have a natural suspicion that he doesn't want to lend me fifteen pounds."

"Correct," Maurice said easily.

"So I was going to offer him this splendid gun as security." Harry felt around his pockets and dragged out the gun.

"It's a nice little gun. Loaded too if you're thinking of murder," Harry said cheerfully.

"But a gun is no use to me, Harry," Maurice protested. "Still . . . Do you need that fifteen pounds desperately?"

"You heard me. I want to fly with you tomorrow."

Maurice grinned across Harry at Hester. "I won't buy it. I'll lend you fifteen pounds, and keep the gun as security." He took the gun, weighing it in his hand, looking suddenly cautious and a little frightened, as though he wasn't used to guns. "I'm always afraid of those things," he explained. He put the gun in his pocket, took out his wallet, and counted out

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fifteen notes. He gave them to Harry.

"We don't need to sign any documents," he said. "Hester can be the witness. You can have the gun back if you ever have any money."

"I'll have the money all right," Harry said, speaking not to Maurice but to Hester.

Maurice smiled at them both indulgently and left them alone, like a kindly uncle who sympathizes with calf love.

"I'm flying tomorrow," Harry said with the satisfaction of someone who visualizes a changing scene. "I'm coming back, Hester. I'm not going to miss the train this time. This is something I'm going through with, tonight, if I can. Everything's fixed. Cross my heart with diamonds, choke me with pearls, your worries are nearly over. Have you any food in the house? I've had practically nothing to eat all day." He put his arm round her; he seemed to think it was a natural gesture. She remembered the roses, and shook him off.

He followed her to the sitting room.

"Simple Simon brings his penny," he said, bowing to Uncle Joe.

Joe made an involuntary movement with his hands, like a woodcutter trying to ward off a falling tree.

"Thank you, Harry," he said in a low voice. He took the money.

"I should have known," he said humbly. "Old Joe is not so smart. Harry, I shall see you tomorrow between ten and half past at the Fairway Arms, Brickford. Until then we shall not meet."

"But tonight—I'll come back with you now and pack," Harry said, with an air of decision.

Prudence came in, talking fast, cutting through all the tensions like a pneumatic drill going through rock, preparing the way for the dynamite.

"Hello everyone the tennis dance was absolutely stinking you should have come Hester you could have mooned about under the trees holding hands I really think these old people are terrible I hope I don't behave that way in ten years' time."

Moira looked at her, concentrating, trying to remember where she had last seen the blue-and-white dress.

"I do like your dress. And what a pretty brooch," she said.

Prudence, brought to a stop, flushed. "It's only Woolworth's."

"But it's lovely. Do let me see."

Prudence took off the brooch.

"Woolworth's is in the high-class trade now. These stones don't look like Woolworth's. They look like real paste to me."

Harry looked at the brooch. "Are you sure you haven't been heaving a brick in Bond Street?" he asked. "Where did you get it? Did Morgan give it to you?"

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"I got it in Woolworth's," Prudence repeated angrily. "May I have it back? I'm going to have a glass of milk and go to bed." This time she swept out of the room like a surfboard rider.

Harry looked as though he would follow her, then stopped. "I'm not an expert," he said, irresolute. He sat down again, as Moira began to make the social noises that precede departure.

"Do stay," Hester said. "We were going to play some Bach on the gramophone, weren't we, Father?"

Wade didn't hear her. He was waiting. Then he heard Maurice's step, and his face began to relax.

"Bach," Hester repeated.

"Bach?" Joe asked. He shuddered. "I'm sorry, Hester, but I must make an early start tomorrow."

"So must I," said Maurice. "But it's hard to resist Bach. You'll let me stay for just half an hour?" he asked Hester. "Perhaps you'll post this for me, Joe. Then I needn't go through the village."

He held out an envelope.

Hester went to the door with Joe and Moira, looking wistfully at the letter.

"I am sorry I am too polite to stay. If you have trouble, Hester, don't be too polite to telephone me."

She looked at him, rejecting him, because he was leaving when he must know there would be trouble. He was too shrewd not to see that her father and Maurice had been playing a money game.

"Well, good night. Have a nice trip to Ireland," Hester said wearily.

Joe walked down the steps.

"Harry!" Moira called from the car.

Harry bolted out of the house. "I'm not staying the night with them," he said reassuringly. "Hester, you're going to marry me, aren't you?"

Hester turned to look at him. The light shone down on him from above, gilding his hair, shadowing his desperate face, darkening his cheekbones, hiding his eyes. He looked wild, exalted and afraid, like a young paratrooper who has jumped and doesn't know if his parachute will open.

"I'm not ashamed to beg. You'll marry me, won't you Hester?" he repeated in a trembling voice.

"Harry!" Moira called again from the car. The muttering engine began to roar.

"Wait, I'm coming," Harry shouted. He caught her hand and held it for a second, then ran down the steps to the car. Hester stayed alone by the door, crushing whatever emotions had arisen.

When Hester came into the house again, it was Maurice who decided to move in to the attack.

"Hester had been looking at me

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suspiciously all evening. What's wrong, Hester? Something about my tie? Straighten it for me."

He stood up, looking at her with the old, friendly, direct smile, so that her hands moved spontaneously toward his tie. Distrust was in the air, but monstrous suspicions are difficult to voice to the person monstrously suspected.

"Shall we have this Bach now?" Maurice suggested. Hester, moving toward the gramophone, became faintly doubtful. If Maurice was what she supposed him to be, surely he would be in a hurry to leave with his gains, instead of behaving as though he was reluctant to leave at all?

"Bach," Wade repeated in a voice of exaggerated relief. "You don't want arias from one of those operas Hester's always raving about."

"I took Hester to an opera one night in London. It wasn't long after we first met. But I told you about that? Yes, of course I did." He looked at her with a reminiscent smile, a man who had thrown bread upon the waters and felt justified now in asking for its return. "Yes, Bach, please. There's no one like him for soothing the spirit," he said gravely.

Hester went to the record cupboard. "The Goldberg Variations?" She spoke in a tired, relaxed voice. It was impossible for her to believe that a man who liked Bach could be a criminal. Her father seemed to be equally deceived by this cultural fallacy. He smiled at Maurice in full companionship, then settled down to listen. All the doubt had fallen away from his face, and he looked like a man who had survived a period of religious persecution and emerged with his spirit strengthened.

"Maurice, I want to say something," her voice trailed into a whisper and dissolved.

Maurice didn't look up. His eyelids dropped a fraction of an inch. He felt in his pocket, brought out his cigarette case, took one cigarette, and put the case back in his pocket, while Hester and her father watched, as though his actions were of tremendous importance and he might expose himself by his manner of holding a cigarette. Hester waited long enough to let him use his cigarette lighter, and then she tried to speak again, but her voice wouldn't come strongly enough.

"What is it, Hester?" her father demanded, in a threatening tone.

"How can I say it, Father? You know what I want to say."

"Hester, you're tired. I think you ought to go to bed."

She ignored him. "Maurice," she said in a frightened voice. "Maurice. I rang the Exchange. You didn't make a call to London. You didn't telephone your broker."

Maurice's cigarette finished its

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interrupted journey to his mouth.

"So you trust me as little as that, Hester?" he asked.

"I—how could you do it, Maurice?" she said miserably.

"Do what, Hester?"

"Well, you didn't telephone your broker. You didn't. You know you didn't. But you came in here and said you did. And now you're going to Dublin tomorrow."

"Why shouldn't I go to Ireland for a couple of days?" he asked impatiently.

"Are you coming back, Maurice? Can you look at me and tell me you're coming back?" she demanded.

He looked at her steadily. "I am coming back, Hester."

Her father turned on her angrily.

"Are you satisfied now, Hester? Have you put enough poison into our relations with Maurice?"

"Father, are you satisfied? He didn't telephone London."

Her father looked quickly at Maurice.

"It's perfectly simple," Maurice said in a tired voice. "My broker —Johnson he's called—doesn't happen to live in London. A lot of stockbrokers don't. You must know that. He lives in a village called Boston Tracy that happens to be in the area of this exchange. So there was no trunk call."

"You said you'd telephoned London," Hester repeated. "I know I'm saying all the wrong things. But, Maurice, you did say you'd telephoned London."

"And I wrote to my broker as well. I gave the letter to Joe to post. I assure you everything is in good order," Maurice said patiently.

"You said you'd telephoned London. London. Why did you say London when you knew it wasn't true?"

"He'll be in London tomorrow morning, so it was true in a sense."

"Father, can't you see he's not telling the truth? And what about the Australian? The man who was following you. He telephoned today to warn me against you."

"The Australian?" Maurice said. His eyes flickered down. "Hester, you're mad. I don't know what she's talking about," he appealed weakly to Wade. He stood up. "I think it's time for me to go home anyway."

"You're not going home, Maurice. Father, don't let him go home. Don't you believe me now? Father, why don't you go and phone this Johnson who lives in Boston Tracy? Just ring him and ask if he's a broker."

"I have the number in my notebook," Maurice said. He took the notebook from his pocket, and turned the pages. "Here it is."

"Tell me the number, Maurice," Hester said.

Maurice closed the notebook.

"He'll have gone to bed. It's too late. It's nearly twelve."

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Wade turned very pale.

"Let me have the number, Maurice."

"He'll have gone to bed," Maurice repeated stubbornly.

"What am I to believe?" Wade shouted. "Hester, what am I to believe?"

Hester looked steadily at Maurice.

"Please, Maurice, give the money back while you can do it decently."

He looked at her father. "You're prepared to lose the chance of a fortune on the advice of an ignorant girl—you know what she wants, of course—she wants the money in her own hands so that she can spend it with her precious Harry."

Hester began to tremble. She stepped away from Maurice and leaned back against the wall.

"You filthy swine!" Wade shouted. He jumped forward and caught Maurice by the throat and, groaning and shouting, shook him backward and forward.

"Father, don't. Father, let him go," Hester cried.

She ran toward them and pulled at her father's wrists, trying to make him loosen his grip. He flung Maurice away from him.

Hester saw Maurice staggering back, turning, and falling, his head directed with a dreadful precision toward the projecting corner of the fireside curb. Wade's arms were still extended, Hester still clutched in futility at his wrists, when they heard the head strike. There was no other sound, and for a moment, no other movement; then Hester dropped her hands with a sigh and turned to her father.

He was standing with his hands held before him, as though he were preparing to defend himself against some violence from the man on the floor.

"Have I killed him, Hester? Tell me, Hester."

"Quiet, Father," she said urgently.

She knelt beside him, opened his coat, put one hand against his chest, then touched the side of his head with reluctant fingers. Her father struck another match, then held it to his cigarette and stared at Maurice's head through it, so that the patch of blood on the temple was lost in the little flame.

"I think it's only concussion," she said. Still kneeling, she turned and rested her head on the chair beside her. "Concussion, Father," she said into the cushion. "I—should we ring for the doctor? Or perhaps he's all right. I'll bathe his head."

She bathed the thick blood from the side of his head, and cleaned the wound. It was only a small, triangular hole in the temple. She thought that he was beginning to stir, and then that he was dead. She stood up. There was a black pressure inside her

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brain, struggling to compress every part of her mind to the point of explosion. Sweat was being crushed out of her onto her forehead.

"Feel his heart, Father," she said. She dropped into a chair, and freed herself from the intolerable strain of balancing.

Her father was sitting with his face in his hands.

"Am I a murderer?" he asked in a whisper. "Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"He's very still," she said, shaking.

"It would have been better to let him keep the money," Wade muttered.

"The money," Hester repeated in surprise. She had forgotten that money was part of the affair. "We must get a doctor, Father. But before we do, listen. If they don't know about the money, they won't know about anything. No one would suppose you'd any reason for quarreling with Maurice."

"It was only a check. That was all. Only a check."

"I'll look in his pocketbook. A minute, perhaps half a minute, then we can telephone the doctor."

She knelt again, and put her hand slowly into the breast pocket of his coat, trying to reach the pocketbook without letting her hand rest near his heart. She took out the pocketbook and looked quickly through it. Money, driving license, passport, checkbook, stamps. She flicked the pound notes, shook the checkbook, opened the pages of the passport. Her father's check was not in the pocketbook. She slipped the wallet back again.

"It must be in another pocket," she whispered.

She began to feel in all his pockets, turning out the contents wildly and ramming them back again: pencils, notebook, cigarette case, lighter, handkerchief, small change. To reach the pockets on his left side she had to turn him a little. She drew back sharply as she saw the rosebud she had put in his buttonhole that morning, felt quickly in the pockets, and found keys, and the gun Harry had sold him. She dropped the gun, and stood up.

"Oh, I can't find it," she said. She wondered when she was going to scream.

"It's of no importance. I can stop the check," her father muttered.

"Oh, won't you understand? The check must have been in that letter he gave to Uncle Joe. You can't stop it if he's dead. They'd know at once you'd killed him for the money. Father, it's not the money. It's the check. It mustn't be found. Stopping it doesn't help. Can't you see?" Her voice was rising. All that she could see was her father accused of murder, perhaps sent to prison, perhaps . . . She tried to imagine herself disposing

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of the body, taking it to the woods. She shook her head wildly.

"Hester, if I've killed him I'll tell the truth."

"Father, leave this to me. I must find that check."

Her father looked up.

"There's someone outside," he said.

She ran to the door and switched off the light. She waited, hearing the step on the path outside, not hearing her own heart, but feeling it rise and fall like the water inside a sea cave in rough weather.

When the doorbell rang she thought she would not answer it, but Morgan was upstairs, and might come down.

"Stay there, Father," she whispered back into the darkened room, and went along the hall to the door.

She turned the handle, and stood in the half light, looking in terror at the hatless man on the doorstep, having only the impression of someone dark and aggressive.

"Good evening," he said. "I want to see Maurice Reid."

She recognized his voice at once. He was the man who had spoken to her in the garden.

"Maurice. He's gone home," she said hopelessly.

"He's left his car," the man observed. "I want to see him. My name's Marryatt. I've spoken to you before."

"Yes."

"So you know I want to see him."

"You can't. He's gone home."

"Would you tell him I want to see him?"

Her father came along the hall toward them.

"What is it, Hester?" he asked in a flat voice.

He looked past her at her father. "Excuse me, but I want to see Maurice Reid."

"You can't see him now," Wade said, uttering every word like a separate sigh. "The truth is—"

"No, it isn't. Go to bed, Father. Go to bed. Oh, go!" Hester cried.

"If I can't see him, I can't. But I want to warn you directly—you, Wade. I was talking to a friend of yours, to Harry. I told you on the telephone, Miss Wade. I don't think I made it strong enough. I don't want to stand back, now. I saw him in London by accident and I came down here to get my hands on him. He robbed and ruined my mother. I saw him in London and I followed him down here, for my own purposes. Now I thought I'd put it as straight as I can, in case—in case he gets anything out of you."

"Now you've told me. Thank you. Good night," Hester said.

"But I still want to speak to him. If you don't believe what I say, that's the end of that. But I'm going to see him now."

"Get out, please," Hester said.

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"I know he's in the house. I'll wait."

"Make him go, Father."

"I won't do him any harm. I want to give him twelve hours to get out of the country. I want to tell him in front of you, so he can't go with your money. Not because I care about you and your money. I want to see there's no more easy money for him."

"Tell him the truth, Hester," Wade said. He groped for a chair; there was no chair, so he swayed against the wall. "Tell him the truth. There's nothing else."

"Maurice isn't here. I've told you," she cried.

"I've killed him," Wade muttered into his chest.

Hester put her hands against Marryatt's chest and tried to push him out of the door.

"I've killed him," Wade repeated loudly, like a deaf man struggling to hear his own words.

The silence gathered for a moment, then Marryatt sighed, and Hester spoke wildly, crying that her father was ill and Maurice had gone home.

Marryatt ignored her. "You're sure?" he asked Wade.

"I don't know. I think I've killed him. All I want to do now is ring the police and tell them." He still leaned against the wall, not moving toward the telephone.

"Would you like me to see him? Before you ring the police?" Marryatt asked, looking at Hester.

"Do what you want," Hester said.

"Don't let yourself get worried," Marryatt advised. "Hell, there might be nothing at all to get worried about."

"He hit his head on the curb," Hester said. "He attacked Father. There was a struggle, an accident."

"No, Hester, I attacked him," her father said.

"In there." Hester stopped at the door. She didn't want to go in the room again, but he held her by the arm and she went with him, keeping her eyes from the spot where Maurice lay.

The Australian looked down, bent over him, picked up one of the slack arms with his fingers on the wrist. He dropped the arm again.

"He's not dead," he said. The relief on his face struggled weakly and then succumbed to hatred. "You'd better tell your father."

He stood over Maurice, staring curiously at the square, solid face, with its wooden look of reliability now intensified by its absolute stillness. "In about ten minutes he'll be fit to rob the first orphan he meets. Do you know what I'd like to do with this imitation corpse? I'd like to stamp on his face until I'd changed its shape so much that women would run away from him, screaming. I don't want to see him dead. I want him alive, and suffering; working for

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a living until his back's bent; turned out of mean lodgings because he can't pay the bill; jailed for begging in the streets."

"No. No," Hester said. She turned and ran from the room, along the hall to where her father sat.

"He's not dead. He's all right, Father," she said, bending over him and kissing him. "Father, you've nothing to worry about now. It's all over."

She caught hold of him, trying to make him stand up. His hands were cold and trembling.

"Father, you've had a shock. You must go to bed now."

He shook his head.

"We can forget about it," she insisted.

"No, we can't. I'm glad, I'm thankful you and Prudence have been spared," he muttered.

"But it's finished. We've escaped. Maurice has escaped."

"I tried to kill him. It wasn't right," he mumbled, his voice trailing away and losing itself in a fog of bewilderment.

She helped him to his feet and guided him up the stairs. The power to control the physical processes of movement was deserting him; he walked slowly, like a wounded soldier lost in enemy territory. He didn't speak while she took off his shoes and coat and laid him down on his bed. She put some blankets over him and then hurried downstairs.

The Australian sat in a chair, smoking, his eyes on Maurice.

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked roughly. "You want me to stay?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Well?"

"I can't, I just can't have anything to do with what you feel about him. I don't think it's right to hate anyone like that."

"Bravely spoken," he said contemptuously.

"I don't want to stay in the room with you when you hate him like this."

"Should I go? Or would you like to leave me alone in the room with him? For God's sake don't begin to cry. I'm not trying to be rude," he added brusquely.

"You're horrible," she said. She sat down. Tears of exhaustion were running from her eyes; she couldn't stop them. "You're just eaten up with hatred and I thought Father had killed him."

"He's moving. Look at him. He's moving."

"And I had to go through his pockets when I thought he was dead."

"That's enough," he said angrily.

She went on crying hopelessly.

"Why are women always so soft?" he demanded angrily.

She put her head in her hands, trying to hide her tears.

"I apologize. I certainly don't know what I've done wrong, but

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I apologize. If you'd stop crying, we could talk like human beings," he said.

She didn't answer him.

"You look absolutely terrible when you cry. All women do," Marryatt said deliberately.

Maurice moved and groaned, and Hester stopped crying instantly.

"What are we to do? How can we explain to him?" she asked.

"Look, what's your name, Hester, get out of this apologetic attitude. It's that rat who's got to do the apologizing." He walked across to Maurice, who was turning his head uneasily.

"Get up!" he said.

Maurice opened his eyes, stared at the face above him, and closed his eyes again.

"Get up!"

"Let me help you, Maurice," Hester said. She ran forward and put an arm under his head. "Are you all right, Maurice?" she asked anxiously.

"I—what—I don't know," he sighed.

"Help me to lift him. Quick!" she said in a peremptory voice to Marryatt. He jerked her out of the way, and dragged Maurice on to a chair.

"You can open your eyes," he said. "Time to wake up. You've been having a little installment of what you're going to get. Life's turning against you, Maurice. You're moving into hard times. Don't look so frightened. I'm going to take you home now."

Maurice moaned. "My head."

"Shall I get a doctor?" Hester asked.

"He doesn't need a doctor. I'll take him home. You don't want him here, do you?"

"I can't move," Maurice groaned. "What happened?"

"Well, what do you think happened?" Marryatt asked.

"I don't know."

"Maybe you never will. When a man's been hit on the head, he sometimes forgets what happened before. Perhaps I hit you. Do you know? I might hit harder next time."

"Hester, I want to stay here," Maurice whispered.

Marryatt looked at her, and then back at Maurice. The gun she had taken from Maurice's pocket lay in the fireplace; she saw him bend and pick it up.

"Please, Hester," Maurice repeated.

"I'm taking you home."

"Hester, he's a murderer. He wants to kill me."

The Australian flicked Maurice on the cheek with the back of his hand. "Get moving!" he said.

"How dare you, how dare you hit him when he's like this? Of course you can stay, Maurice," Hester cried.

"I'm taking him home," the Australian said. "You needn't worry. All I want is a chance to mor-

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alize. I'm picking the habit up from you," he said insolently.

"Please go away."

"Not without him."

"You're not a civilized being."

"I give up," Marryatt said violently. "I give up the whole damned business. Keep your rotten little swindler. Bathe his head and stroke his hair and give him breakfast in bed. Let him fill his pockets with your father's money until the whole family's bankrupt. So long as you do it politely in the English manner, you'll be able to admire yourself at the end of it. I don't understand how your father forgot his social position long enough to let him knock the little rat down."

"It was because—because of something he said." Hester stopped, looking at Maurice, remembering, while both the men watched her. "If he's strong enough to move, I wish you'd take him home," she said to Marryatt. "You can't stay here," she said to Maurice. "You can't come again."

"I'm not well, I want a doctor," Maurice said. His eyes were closed. He seemed to be making a brave effort to speak. "Sorry to be a nuisance," he said, whispering.

Hester looked at him uncertainly.

"You can sleep at home," Marryatt said quickly. "I'll take you there. I've a few things I'd like to say to you on the way. Now get going."

"Be quiet," Hester said furiously. "I won't have you in this house giving orders."

The Australian turned away from Maurice and looked at her. "Good night!" he shouted. "If you can look after yourself so well, get on with it!"

He went out of the room in a rush, and she waited until he had slammed the door. Then she turned to Maurice.

"You must leave early in the morning. I needn't see you. I don't want to see you again, ever."

She left him quickly, and went upstairs.

She stopped outside her father's room. She could hear no sound; she didn't want to disturb him, so she went on to her own room, and undressed, and lay down. The grinding anxieties that filled her mind destroyed all sense of time; she didn't know how much later it was when she heard the car. Perhaps Maurice was leaving. It was safe now, the Australian had gone away. Someone was moving in the house; it was easy to imagine these things. She listened in terror, but there was no one moving. It must be nearly dawn. If Maurice had escaped, there was still the question of the check. She should go down and ask him, but she had heard the car. A gray light was coming now, and the birds were singing hoarsely as though their voices were breaking. The stairs creaked again, it was cow-

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ardly not to get up, not to shout "Who's there?" It was nearly daylight, and then everything was black as she fell into sleep at last.

FRIDAY

Prudence woke at eight in the morning. She remembered that Jackie was there to do the cooking; she was suddenly very hungry. She ran downstairs.

Jackie wasn't in the kitchen. There was no burned toast, no strong tea. She went to the sitting room, and looked in.

Jackie was standing in the middle of the room, holding a duster. His flowered shirt looked shockingly bright beneath his drawn, exhausted face. Two limp rosebuds sagged from his buttonhole.

"Good morning, Jackie. Going gay—the roses, I mean."

Jackie's hand went up to the roses. "He—he put them there, last night."

"He?"

"Harry," Jackie muttered. "I've always been fond of flowers. I'll get the breakfast, Miss."

Prudence suddenly remembered. "Morgan's flying to Ireland today. I'd better get him up."

She went back upstairs and knocked on Morgan's door.

"Are you going to have some breakfast before you go, Morgan?"

She opened the door cautiously. The room was heavy with cigarette smoke. Morgan sat in the middle of it, dressed in his usual dark clothes, holding his brief case.

She looked at his face, and was frightened by the despair she saw on it. She took refuge in a breezy refusal to see that anything was wrong.

"Is that all you're taking?" she asked, indicating the brief case.

He shook his head. "Nothing more. Everything's gone. Two years and two months. The end's worse than the beginning. The end's the worst. Do you think I can go, Prudence? Will they stop me? Brickford's a long way. Ten forty-five the plane goes. It's only half-past eight. Prudence, when they say it, don't believe them." He jumped up, and stood staring into her face.

"Morgan, have some breakfast," she said in a frightened voice.

"I'm going. The plane's my only chance."

He pushed past her. She heard him running down the stairs. She was curt and abstracted all through breakfast, but Hester seemed scarcely aware of her presence, and spoke only once throughout the meal.

At eleven o'clock Prudence was kneeling on a green sward of cotton, looking hopelessly at the instructions which were supposed to map her course around the strange peninsulas of the human form.

"Bring Fold to meet perfora-

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tions at F, gathering lower back to meet notches. Leave open at G," she read in despair. "Who's that? Oh, Jackie. There's no G, and I've lost all the notches. Attach collar to waist? It can't mean anything."

"It's eleven o'clock, Miss. The plane will have gone."

"The plane? To Ireland, you mean. I wish I'd gone too. I've just had about enough of dressmaking. But I don't want to go to Ireland. I'd like to go to Italy, or Spain. Somewhere hot, some country where people had feelings, and did things, and weren't so dull as they are here. I go back to school in ten days, Jackie. Oh, it's going to be so boring. What would you really like to be, Jackie, if you had the chance?"

"I always wanted to be in a dance band," Jackie said dreamily.

Prudence slashed at the material. "Can you play anything, Jackie?"

"No, Miss, I never had the chance."

Prudence stood up, looking in amazement at what she had cut out.

"They're flying now. I wouldn't care if they stayed in Ireland forever. Except Harry. Who's quite funny sometimes."

Jackie pulled the roses out of his shirt and dropped them in the wastepaper basket.

"Salmon for lunch, Miss?" he said, beginning to back out of the room. "You could have it straight from the tin, and no cooking."

A quarter of an hour later she looked out of the window. Jackie, wearing his yellow pullover now, was hurrying through the garden. He was carrying a bulging brown-paper shopping bag by its string handle. Prudence assumed he was going to the village to buy some food for lunch. She wondered where he had found the money.

When she went into the kitchen, the housekeeping money, a meager enough remnant, was intact. Underneath the opened tin of salmon was a sheet of paper, stained with the dismal gray oil of the dark, repellent fish.

"Dear Miss," it said,

"I have gone to see my Mother in Hospital. (Being visiting Day) Love Jackie."

Jackie didn't come back. Hester and Prudence ate the tinned salmon alone. Later, when they heard the news about the airplane, they had no thoughts to spare for Jackie, or to wonder why he had gone away.

EXPLANATION

"That's all," Hester said. "It's the whole story. So you see . . ."

"What do I see?" Inspector Lewis demanded, not yet aware how much he ought to see.

"I don't know what you see. But it's the whole story," Hester

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repeated. "Isn't it, Father?"

He looked at her with a stricken smile, guilty as a man who has survived a disaster but has seen his friends drown. She crossed the room quickly and sat on the arm of his chair.

"Father, we've told all the truth. There's nothing more we can do now."

"You can answer a few questions, Miss Wade," Inspector Lewis said. "There's some information I'd like. About Maurice Reid, for instance. Now, Mr. Wade. You gave him a check. Was it a sizable check?"

"It was for all I've got. No, that's not quite true. I have a very small income from a trust fund."

"The amount of the check?"

"It was for nine thousand, five hundred."

"You've stopped this check, of course?"

Wade squirmed. "Actually—I—I was going to stop it, that Friday. Then we had the news. Then, then I thought everything was over. So—so I haven't."

"But if he sent it direct to his bank, it would form part of his estate. It wouldn't revert to you."

"Stop it now, by wire, Father," Hester said.

He nodded.

"I wonder why you didn't stop it before? Was it because you thought it would still draw attention to your quarrel?"

"Don't say a word more. Don't say a word until you get a lawyer," Moira advised sharply.

Inspector Lewis hesitated. "Do you want a lawyer to be present, Mr. Wade?" he asked formally.

"No, let's continue as we are," Wade said, shivering, like a penitent who has chosen his own punishment.

"Then we'll return to Maurice Reid. He decided to fly to Ireland either because he had been assaulted by you, Mr. Marryatt, and feared another attack, or because he had your check in his pocket, Mr. Wade. It might, you know, seem to some people, although not necessarily to me, that it was in both your interests to get rid of him. If it can be proved that he is the man who didn't fly, I should very much like to know where he is now." He turned on Marryatt. "The gun," he demanded in his most formidable voice. "Where is the gun that Harry sold to Maurice Reid?"

Marryatt looked more arrogant than ever. "I couldn't tell you. It's not my habit to carry a gun. When I came in, this gun was lying on the fireplace. I picked it up. I might have had the idea of putting it out of Maurice's reach, though I don't believe he'd ever have had the guts to use a gun. I'm not sure what I did with it, then. I put it down somewhere. On that table, I think."

Sergeant Young walked across to the table where the drooping

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roses stood in the blue vase. He touched them reflectively, listening still to the questions and answers.

"It wasn't here in the morning when you came in this room?" Lewis asked Prudence, speaking to her coldly, like an acknowledged enemy.

"No. Jackie was in here first, you know."

"Mr. Marryatt, why did you come to this house so late on Thursday night?"

"I didn't come late. I came early, waiting for him. After I left him on the road, I thought a lot about what was the right thing to do. I mean my idea of what was right. It might not be yours," he added indifferently.

"So you thought of what was right—and you decided?"

"I decided I'd run him out of the country, without the Wades' money to help him. I was waiting to get hold of him, and—and put my point. Then Miss Wade there got me kind of annoyed. I walked out of the house and went back to the Running Fox. I didn't try to get in quietly. I shouted to the landlord to open up. You think that's what I'd have done if I'd just killed a man?" He turned on Hester, challenging her to answer.

"You're putting it too directly again, Mr. Marryatt. No one has accused you of anything," Inspector Lewis said.

"That's not the way it sounded to me," Marryatt said angrily.

"You're quite certain you left the gun in this room?"

Moira arranged her hair with an absent hand while she studied Marryatt intently. "Don't answer that," she advised. "If you're not careful they'll be saying you made that noise at the Running Fox just for an alibi. They'll be accusing you of coming out again quietly, later, of meeting Maurice, when you were supposed to be in bed."

"Thanks," Marryatt said. "I'll remember you tried to help me, when I'm choosing my last breakfast. Have you got any little word of encouragement, Miss Wade?"

He turned his angry glance on her. It was as though he stood alone, hating everyone in the room, and caring nothing for any of them.

"Yes. I have something to say. I don't know what all this talk of murder is about. I thought all we were trying to do was find out who didn't fly on that plane. If it's to be more than that, why shouldn't you suspect me? I'd as much cause to kill Maurice."

Sergeant Young turned away from the table and the roses.

"If you'll excuse me, sir," he said apologetically.

"Yes, Sergeant Young?" Lewis asked.

"There are only sixteen roses here, sir."

"Roses?" Lewis repeated in amazement.

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"Why is it all Maurice? What about Morgan?" Hester demanded. "He was the kind of man who might hide."

Moira smiled.

"What about Harry, while you're about it? He was a man who never finished what he'd intended to do. He said so himself," she said, smiling in a kind of triumph at Hester.

"Any minute, now, Mrs. Ferguson, I'll tell you what you should do," Marryatt said. "Maybe you're not feeling too good yourself. But lay off other people. And I'll tell you something while I'm about it, Mr. Inspector Lewis. Leave the Wades out of this. I saw him, Wade, crazy to ring the police and give himself up when he hadn't even killed the man. As for Miss Wade, she wouldn't have the heart to throw a stone at a rabbit. Another thing. What about giving us a bit of information? You must know something."

"You're not on trial, Mr. Marryatt. I'm not obliged to produce any evidence."

"Too right I'm not on trial. So you answer me just one question, not like a policeman, just like a man. You've been to that bar in Brickford, where they met. You've been to the airport. You've heard something. Are you telling me not one of these men has been identified? No one heard one of them call the other by name? I don't believe it."

"You'll have to believe it. Some of their conversation was overheard. One of them did call another by his name. But the man who heard isn't willing to swear to anything, except the name began with M."

"I don't believe that's all," Marryatt said violently. "They were in a bar. What did they drink?"

"Give me those notes, Sergeant Young. No, I don't want them all, complete with the twelve-thirty at Lingfield. I want the extracts."

Sergeant Young left the roses with a sigh, opened his coat dreamily, and selected a few pages of typescript from his inside pocket. He glanced absently through the pages, stopped for a second to read, then walked across the room.

Lewis snatched the papers from him.

"They drank whisky. Three. Twice."

"Were they all whisky drinkers? I had some drinks with Harry. He drank beer," Marryatt said.

Moira shook herself with an angry tremble, like an old woman remembering an insult. "Oh, come," she said. "Harry would drink anything he could get free."

"But he liked beer?"

"I don't think that's in any way conclusive," Lewis said regretfully. "The others drank whisky on occasion, I suppose."

"Joe did, sometimes," Moira said. "I don't propose to answer any more questions about him."

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"I've known Maurice to drink whisky," Wade said.

"And you should just see the bottles in Morgan's wardrobe," Prudence said. "So we still don't know what happened to Maurice."

"Oh, yes, we do," Sergeant Young said reproachfully. "We know for a fact Maurice Reid flew in that plane."

Inspector Lewis sat still for more than a minute, then stretched out his hand and took the pages from Sergeant Young. He read slowly, while they all watched him. Moira made an effort to speak, but Prudence scowled at her so fiercely that she gave up. Lewis began to smile. He looked as though he was apart from them all, enjoying some unique experience, like listening to a crystal set with the only available earphones.

"Sergeant Young was absolutely right," he said benevolently. "Maurice Reid flew on that airplane. There really is no doubt at all. This passage, Sergeant." He handed the pages to the sergeant, who read them in a bemused manner.

Lewis smiled delightedly. "Read the passage aloud. Let them all see."

" 'There was a word about horses and Ireland, but next thing it was accidents and Australia, or it might have been South Africa, then I lost interest.' When asked what they said about horses: 'It was only the Grand National.' When asked about Australia: 'Nothing about Australia. It might have been South Africa. It was a place like that. No it wasn't New Zealand. It was South Africa or it was Australia. I'll swear to one of them. I've an uncle in one of them and a cousin in the other, so I'm sure of my facts. . . . One of them says to another: That reminds me about something that happened to me once. I had a premonition, he says, or words to that effect, when I was in Australia, or South Africa, and you haven't been there, have you, he says to that other, crushing the opposition. No, says the other, But I have, says the third man, interrupting. Isn't it time we left. . . .' "

"I'm not sure I understand," Hester said slowly.

"I do. I do!" Prudence cried. "No, wait. I wish I had a pencil."

"I don't think I know all the facts," Marryatt said. "Harry had been in Australia. Had he been in South Africa? No?"

"No he hadn't," Hester said. "Maurice had been in both. Morgan—"

"You told us," Inspector Lewis said happily. "You told us all of them. Morgan had been in South Africa, but not Australia. Maurice Reid had been in both. And Mr. Ferguson—"

"I've told you already. Joe had never been in that part of the

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world," Moira admitted cautiously.

"So Maurice was one of the three men there, one of the three men on the airplane. I follow," Marryatt said. "So that's over." He didn't specify what he meant. He spoke in a voice that was hard and sharp, like an iron fence erected quickly to keep other people out of his private world. "I'll be getting along, then. I think I'd like some fresh air."

"No, stay," the inspector said. "We haven't finished, have we, Mr. Wade?"

Wade turned his handsome, muddled face to the inspector. "Poor Maurice," he said, sighing.

"But I don't understand," Hester said.

"I'll explain," Inspector Lewis said, very glad of the opportunity. "Listen. Harry had been in Australia, but not South Africa. Morgan was the reverse. He'd been in South Africa, but not Australia. Mr. Ferguson had been in neither. Maurice Reid had been in both. Now what's the evidence? One of the three men in the Fairway Arms, and these three were certainly the three who flew in the plane, one of them made a remark that showed he had been in South Africa or Australia. The second man hadn't been there. The third man stated he had been in the country referred to. Now, as we couldn't get the landlord to be more explicit, we can't know who made the remark, or even who answered it, but we can prove Maurice Reid was present.

"One of the four men who were supposed to have traveled in the plane must have made the initial remark," Lewis continued implacably. "Joseph Ferguson had been in neither country, so he can be excluded. Any of the other three could have said it. If Harry Walters made the initial remark, saying, for instance, 'It happened when I was in Australia, have you been there?' only Maurice Reid could have said, 'Yes, I have.' So if Harry made the remark, Maurice Reid was present. If Morgan Price said: 'It happened to me in South Africa, have you been there?' only Maurice Reid could have said, 'Yes, I have.' And if Maurice made the initial remark, either Harry or Morgan could say, 'Yes, I've been there'!"

"I see. Don't tell me. I've got it," Prudence cried. "Maurice has to be there, in that Brickford pub I mean, every time. Because Uncle Joe didn't say it, and if Harry said it Maurice was there, and if Morgan said it Maurice was there, and if Maurice said it he was there too. But are you sure the three men in the Brickford pub were the three men on the plane?"

"They were waiting in the Fairway Arms, together. When they got to the plane they said they'd been waiting for someone who hadn't turned up. It's a certainty."

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Inspector Lewis was examining the typescript again. "I think we can work out the rest now, don't you, Sergeant Young?"

"Yes, sir."

"But first of all I need some more help from all of you. Which of these four men was interested in fishing?"

"Fishing?" Moira said. "Certainly not Joe."

"Not Harry," Hester said quickly. "He—he didn't like anything like that. I'm sure he'd never fished in all his life—not his adult life, anyway. Maurice? I'm certain I once heard him say he hadn't fished since he was a boy. Morgan—I can't be so definite about Morgan, but he wasn't the kind of man you could imagine with a fishing rod."

Lewis scowled. "But two of these men were enthusiasts!"

"But they weren't," Prudence protested. "They just simply weren't."

Lewis looked at the typescript again. "I'm exaggerating when I say enthusiasts. One of them said he'd satisfied his curiosity and he didn't like it, and another said he hadn't had an opportunity until the beginning of last season. I ask you all to think again."

They thought again, but none of them could produce a word of evidence about fishing.

Prudence was in the kitchen, making tea and cutting sandwiches, when Marryatt walked in. He looked disparagingly at the dishes that lay in the sink.

"You haven't been doing much dishwashing lately, have you?"

"And you haven't been knocking on many doors, have you?" Prudence retorted. "If you'd like the information, a thing that people simply can't stand is other people to come in their kitchens to see if the bottoms of their saucepans are shining like a domestic-science department."

Marryatt took off his coat. "I'll wash the dishes for you," he said. "I suppose you haven't had much time."

"We've been living on fried eggs and tea since Friday," Prudence said. "And every time I go near the sink I begin to cry. I'm getting over that, now. I can't spend my whole life crying for people who've been killed. I suppose I'm callous," she added with a certain satisfaction, her mind already racing ahead to the time when she would move, hardhearted, disdainful, mysterious, through a wondering world.

"The kettle's boiling. Don't worry about the policemen. They've gone to the Running Fox for a meal, in their prim way, afraid of being corrupted by a sandwich. Prudence—"

"You wouldn't like to call me Miss Wade?" Prudence asked.

"No, I wouldn't. You can call me Tom. Prudence, you're getting

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over this. What about Hester?"

"You'd better ask her yourself. Of course, she did rather like Harry," Prudence said cautiously.

"She was going to marry him? Do you have something for drying dishes?"

"There's a clean tea towel somewhere. Oh, I'm sorry, it has a hole in it. She wasn't going to marry him. It's the kind of news people do tell their sisters. But she did in a way rather like him. Do you want cheese or some cardboard out of a tin on your sandwiches?"

"Cheese. Harry told me he was going to marry her."

"Harry was always making plans that didn't come off," Prudence said scornfully. "He didn't have real purpose in life. Only poetry, and he didn't work at that."

"But Hester liked him?" Marryatt put the last of the cups carefully on the table.

Prudence sighed. "I know absolutely what you're getting at. Don't be so—so oblique. If Hester's given half a chance she'll spend the rest of her life with his memory, bringing out hand-printed editions of his poems. People do seem to get a bit soppy when they're twenty. But I shan't. Anyway, she hasn't made up her mind. She thinks he might be alive, she thinks he might be the man who didn't fly."

Marryatt's brows came down. He had features that lent themselves easily to the expression of anger. "If she finds that he did fly? That he's dead? She wouldn't enjoy having that proved? Whether she enjoys it or not, she's going to get it. I'm not going to have the shadow of Harry, neither dead nor alive, hanging around for the rest of my life."

Prudence's face darkened. "Kill him if you like, if it makes you feel happier. I'd sooner he was alive. I dare say I'm being sentimental," she added faintly.

"Prudence, put down that tray. You're going to help me. You know that Harry was after Morgan. He was searching for something he believed Morgan was hiding. He was doing it inefficiently and recklessly—like a boy who's looking for gulls' eggs only because he enjoys climbing a cliff," he said, going back to his own experience for the metaphor. "Now, when Jackie came here, what did Morgan do? He shut himself up in his room and didn't come down to meals. Jackie was a crook. Don't you think there's a chance Morgan was afraid of being recognized—because he was a crook himself?"

"I think Morgan was just mad," Prudence protested.

"People who hide something aren't necessarily mad. I'm not calling you mad, for instance," Marryatt said carefully.

Prudence's pink-and-brown face became entirely pink.

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"You've been pretty vague about that brooch, haven't you? Jackie went away, and the brooch isn't mentioned any more."

Prudence's face was so red now that it seemed possible she might cry. "It isn't your business. None of it's your business. You're here only because of Maurice. We know what happened to Maurice, so now you can go away. Hester hates you anyway, and so do I, and if you won't go out of the kitchen I will."

She began to walk to the door. He caught her roughtly by the arm and swung her round.

"You still have the brooch, haven't you?"

"Perhaps," she said. "Let go my arm."

He let her go. "Now fetch the brooch."

"I'm not sure if I can find it," she muttered.

"You'd better find it. The police will want to see it. I don't know why you kept it. That's not my business. Perhaps you just wanted an expensive-looking brooch."

"It's not true. It's simply not true. I was going to give it back, then Jackie went away and everything happened and I forgot."

"Now you've remembered. Go and get it." He was quite offensively uninterested in her explanations. He treated her as a nonentity with an interesting brooch. "You'll have to get it sooner or later. The police will make you."

"The police would never bully me like this," she said angrily. "They have better manners. I'll go and look for the brooch. If I throw it out of the window, that's my business."

"And if the police throw you in reform school that's your business too. Come on. So far as I'm concerned, you forgot about the brooch and you've just remembered it."

Prudence went sullenly from the room.

Marryatt picked up the tray and took it to the sitting room, where Hester and her father sat in the kind of exhausted silence that might overtake people who have drifted too long alone, helpless, in a lifeboat in an empty ocean.

He poured the tea and offered it to both of them. Wade tasted it, and put the cup down heavily.

"It's cold," he said, with the painful resignation of a man almost totally inured to misfortune.

Inspector Lewis and Sergeant Young looked particularly out of place on the chintz sofa where they now sat side by side, menacing but professionally uncomfortable, like bailiffs.

"This fishing," Lewis said. "Everything else is fixed now, it's only the fishing. We've worked out the rest, you see, we'll get to that in a minute, but if we can't get something out of the fishing we can't see the end of this at all. Now this

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old man Smith who was drinking bitter with his mind on the stars and talking about how they might have been fishing in Ceylon or they might not, I told you he kept bringing astrology into it. We haven't any inside knowledge to explain this. You people, who knew all the men well, absolutely must try again. Did you ever hear any of those men who were to fly to Dublin discuss astrology?"

Hester looked at her father hopelessly, and shook her head. She was about to speak, when suddenly an expression of the deepest concentration, followed almost instantly by doubt and irresolution, crossed her face. She was like a novice playing chess, who sees a good move and realizes almost at once that it may be a bad one.

"I had an idea," she said weakly, "then it went away. But I have thought of something. Wherever this fishing happened, if it took place last season, it can't have been in Ceylon. I knew that was ridiculous. Morgan, Maurice, Uncle Joe—none of them has been out of England for at least a year. And I don't believe people go fishing in Ceylon anyway."

"Except people who earn their living by it," Marryatt said.

Wade looked up, and smiled faintly at his daughter.

"Don't forget the pearl-fishers," he said. "Bizet." He relapsed into his private agony.

"Bizet?" Lewis turned on Sergeant Young. "Have you ever heard of Bizet, Sergeant?"

"Sir, he wrote *Carmen*. Tor—eee—a—dor. You know. And an opera called *The Pearl-Fishers*. I haven't heard it."

"Yes," Hester said. "That's it. Oh, I nearly had it before when you were talking about astrology. It has to be *The Pearl-Fishers*. The hero's called Nadir, that's your astrological term, and he falls in love with a priestess and goes away for five years and comes back and he finds she saved his life when she was a child—or was that his friend? Yes, it must have been. The friend is the chief and the other two are going to be burned and the friend lets them escape and is burned on the pyre instead. Why, we have some records here, if you want."

Lewis shook his head. "It sounds very confused," he said guardedly. "Opera is not my subject."

"When did you see this opera?" Sergeant Young asked quickly.

"I think it was Sadler's Wells. Covent Garden has never done it, or not for a long time. I went with—with Maurice."

"At the beginning of last season?" Young asked, knowing the answer.

"Yes. A lot of people went, because it was the first chance they'd had to hear it. Maurice liked it more than I did."

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"Ceylon?" Lewis said impatiently. "Where does Ceylon come in?"

"It's set in Ceylon."

"And Maurice Reid liked it. So he was the man who said it had its merits."

"Not necessarily," Marryatt interjected. "What if the others had seen it too?"

"Morgan was tone deaf," Prudence said. "He wouldn't go to opera."

"I don't think Harry liked opera. But he couldn't have gone anyway. He was in Australia when it was put on. I know he only came back four months ago. So—" She looked at Moira and checked herself quickly. "I'm sorry, I'm terribly sorry," she said in a stricken voice.

Moira stood up. "Yes, Joe and I saw it together," she said. "He'd be the one to discuss it with Maurice. You're right, all of you. You've proved what you set out to prove. Joe is dead. It makes no difference to me," she said in a shuddering voice. "I knew it. He'd never hide himself from me." Her expensive pink-and-white complexion remained inexorably pink and white. She walked to the door, holding her hands a little before her, as though she were groping her way through the darkness.

Hester ran forward and touched her gently on the arm.

"Moira, shall I go home with you?"

Moira looked rigidly ahead. "Why should you? We never liked each other. You've been trying to arrive at the truth: that's part of it."

Marryatt stood up. "If you've a car outside, I'll drive you home," he said impersonally. "Otherwise, we'll walk. Have you a car here?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then."

When they had left the room Hester sat, holding on to the sides of the chair as though she were afraid of being thrown out of it.

Inspector Lewis made preparatory noises with his throat.

"Are you feeling all right, Miss Wade?"

"Yes." She had to be all right, she had to be excessively normal; humiliation is an emotion that demands its own interment.

"Astrology isn't one of my subjects. I didn't see . . ."

"Nadir," she said. "That was the astrological term your witness couldn't remember. At least it means something in astronomy, so I suppose it does in astrology. It's the opposite to the zenith, I think. It also means a time of depression, like this, I suppose," she said sadly. "Nadir is the name of the hero in *The Pearl-Fishers,* but he escaped."

Lewis glanced again at his notes. "Time of depression. Yes, I see. It fits. And you're all reasonably satisfied that only Maurice Reid and Joseph Ferguson could

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have seen this opera—that they are the only two of these four men who could have discussed it?"

"Yes, we're satisfied," Wade said.

"Then I think there's no doubt that Ferguson was on that plane," Lewis said regretfully, feeling, perhaps, that of the four men concerned, Joe, the most reputable, should, by some moral law, have been the man to escape.

"So it's Harry or Morgan," Prudence said in a taut voice. She put her hand in her pocket again and clutched the brooch tightly. She wanted to fling it on the table and run out of the room. Explanations were rising as far as her throat and sinking again. It was a time for nonchalance; she was sure she would blush. She had an important piece of evidence; they would all be grateful. She couldn't endure the thought of being attacked as her father and Marryatt had been attacked. It was important that the brooch should be produced and the discussion finished before Marryatt came back. The door opened, and Marryatt was back already.

"Is everything finished?" he asked. "Was it Harry? Was it Morgan?"

"I'm about to explain," Lewis said, sighing.

Marryatt looked at Hester. "Let's get it over quickly," he suggested.

"I was waiting for you, Mr. Marryatt. I wanted to ask you—when you met Harry Walters on Friday, he told you he was having lunch under a haystack. He wasn't more explicit?"

"No."

"We've interviewed the woman in the village shop," Lewis said, blinking at Hester. "She says he bought coffee; processed Stilton cheese wrapped in silver paper, packed in a round cardboard box with a yellow label; a pound of tomatoes; and some cream cracker biscuits in a blue paper carton. All on your account, Miss Wade. She remembers it clearly because afterward she thought he should have said on Mr. Wade's account. She also thought he should have paid cash."

"Oh, you keep nibbling away at Harry's reputation," Hester said wildly. "You don't have to do it. Everything's admitted. Harry wasn't reliable. I know all about Harry."

"But do you, Miss Wade? And I'm not here to attack his character. What I was wondering, was he a tidy kind of man?"

"He wasn't," Hester said shortly.

"Then he might have left that cardboard box and the blue paper carton lying around where he ate his lunch. It might just follow—I'm not saying necessarily it would—that we could find if there's some place, not in this house, that he had reason to be interested in."

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"I think—" Prudence began.

"One minute, please, until I've finished what I have to say. I have some notes here, taken from a statement made by a man called Murray, the editor of a poetry magazine. He was a friend of Harry Walter's, and his statement may add to your knowledge of that young man. What he has to say is that Harry cultivated the society of criminals. He wanted to be—where is it? What was it, Sergeant Young?"

"François Villon, sir."

Lewis looked over the papers at Hester.

"You know about this François Villon?"

"I know who he was."

Lewis looked relieved. "Then I needn't explain. You understand that your friend Harry had some idea of becoming one of these criminals. It seems he actually arranged to take part in a train mail-bag robbery, but he missed the train. You know about this?"

Hester shook her head. "Why are you telling us this?"

"I'm trying to fit your Jackie into the picture. I've already arranged to have his description sent out—we won't have much trouble in finding him. But Miss Wade, Mr. Wade, you should have known this isn't the kind of place, nor yet the kind of house, that attracts men like this Jackie. There's a chance, you know, he came here for a purpose."

"You wouldn't like to cut a straight line through all those circumlocutions?" Marryatt asked. "If you know which went on that plane, Morgan or Harry, why not tell us now?"

Lewis held up a warning hand. "There's a possibility that Jackie chose this house and place by accident. There's another that he came here deliberately, or was sent by others, to find out what he could about Harry, or Morgan. Wait. When the thoroughly confused statement made by this editor, Murray, is laid alongside Miss Wade's evidence, a most significant point emerges. Murray explains that Harry was shown a photograph of the man who got away with the Sackford diamonds. You know about that? It was one of the biggest robberies of this generation. The first fact we've had on it is Murray's statement. One man got away with the diamonds and left his two friends out in the cold. These two have been looking for him ever since. They show everyone his photograph, and they showed Harry. Shall I tell you when that robbery took place? In June, two years ago. Two years and two months ago." He looked at Hester. "Does that make anything in your mind stir?"

"How could it? What could we have to do with a diamond robbery? You don't mean that Harry had anything to do with it?" she asked in a terrified whisper, as

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though she were speaking across a deathbed.

"No, he doesn't. And we've had enough of this," Marryatt said loudly. "Why don't you come right out and say what you mean? If Harry had anything to do with it, it was only because he'd seen the photograph. Two years and two months. Hester, don't you remember what you told us about Morgan being alone for two years and two months."

"Morgan! Do you mean that Morgan stole these jewels?"

"I told you," Marryatt said to Prudence. "I told you that he was hiding something and Harry was after it. And don't get this wrong again," he said angrily to Hester. "Harry had seen the photograph. He came down here with the Fergusons, met your lot, recognized Morgan. It's a million to one he was only after the insurance. He wanted to marry you and he'd no money, and no other chance of getting any."

"He should have come to us," Inspector Lewis said bitterly. "All he had to do was to come to the police. If he'd told us he knew the man who had the Sackford diamonds, we'd have had them within twenty-four hours, and he'd have had his reward as well. But he had to go plunging round with his idiotic strategems, playing his infantile games until he had this Morgan Price in such an alcoholic panic that he took the terrible risk of arranging to leave the country, which is what he'd have done long ago if he hadn't been afraid of being spotted at the ports. When Morgan heard that a plane was leaving from an obscure airfield for Ireland, he was driven by fear of Harry to take the chance. Remember, there are no passports needed for Ireland."

Marryatt looked belligerently at the inspector. "Let's get on with it. You know, I suppose. Was Morgan the man who didn't fly?"

"I can answer the question," Lewis said shortly. "If we're right about the rest, it's the most obvious point of all. But first I'd like to add something to what Miss Wade has said. Morgan Price had someone else to hide from. And that was Jackie."

"Jackie!" Wade repeated numbly.

"Jackie. You've made it plain enough in your statements. From the moment Jackie came into the house, Morgan was afraid to come out of his room. He wouldn't come downstairs to telephone until Miss Wade promised to keep Jackie and Harry in the kitchen. He wouldn't come downstairs for meals."

"But he did come out," Prudence protested suddenly. "He came out to the chapel, when I was there with Harry, on Thursday morning."

"I think you'll find Jackie was busy in the kitchen at that point. Morgan took the risk and came

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out the front way. But if I'm right, it was a risk, or he saw it as one. But he took that risk—to get to the chapel, and Harry."

Hester made a restless movement with her hands, then forced them into stillness again.

"If you're not going to get on with this, I will," Marryatt said violently. "What about that brooch, Prudence?"

"I'm so glad you reminded me," Prudence said graciously. "This is the brooch Jackie lent me, Inspector. I thought you might be interested in it." She put her hand in her pocket and held the brooch out to him, with an amused, disparaging smile, like one collector showing another a trivial piece unwisely acquired in the saleroom.

He took it, and held it in his hard, scrubbed hand, turning it a little to let the light enter the hard heart of the stones. He stared at it, bemused and angry. He took a list from his pocket, and looked at it, and nodded.

"It's not my subject," he said cautiously, "but if it's as real as it looks, then Jackie was in this up to his neck." He frowned as he spoke the last few words. "He found where Morgan Price had hidden the lot, even if Harry didn't. He wouldn't have tried to give the brooch away if he hadn't found the rest. Very generous, these crooks are, on impulse, but not to the point of giving away all they've got."

"But Inspector Lewis, surely he wouldn't give away anything valuable," Hester said.

"It's part of the pattern. Don't ask me why they do it. I can only tell you that again and again we catch them because they do. I'll keep this brooch. Miss Prudence will perhaps be prepared to sign a statement declaring how it came into her possession."

"Oh, gladly," Prudence said, dejection spreading across her face.

"And now, Mr. Marryatt, as you're so determined, we'll get on with it. If we take the evidence of this numerologist, Benson, the man who remembered someone's name began with M. He wasn't listening, he wouldn't have heard anything if he hadn't once been an under manager at Woolworth's. But as it happens, his ear was caught by the familiar name."

He stopped, took out the sheaf of papers, and looked through the typescript once again. "This is what he heard: 'Woolworth's! What do you think about that?' And the second man said: 'I'm afraid I can't think anything. I didn't see it.' And the third man said: 'Woolworth's? What's all this? When did it happen?' And that's all." Inspector Lewis folded the papers again carefully, and returned them to his pocket. "After that, the grocer went on with his astrology, and neither of them heard another word that could usefully be called evidence."

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"And this conversation could only refer to the brooch. If you're going to take the word of a crazy numerologist as proof, I'm not," Marryatt said.

"Take it easy, Mr. Marryatt. A man can be a numerologist or an astrologist and be just as sane as any member of the stock exchange, or any dealer in farm machinery, when it comes to that. People take up these things as a way of passing the time, or explaining the universe, two things we're all concerned with, in our own way. I'm prepared to take the word of this numerologist because he's an honest man, who was clearly not prepared to manufacture evidence to oblige. You know what it proves, do you?

"You think it proves that Morgan went on the airplane, because there were only two of these four men who didn't see the brooch that night, Morgan and Maurice Reid, and there were two men at Brickford who were heard to say they didn't see it. You think it proves that either Harry or Joe Ferguson went on the airplane, because they both saw the brooch and one man was heard to talk as though he'd seen it. And as you're already satisfied that Ferguson was on the plane, you're satisfied that Harry was the man who didn't fly."

"Harry? Harry alive?" Hester said faintly. "Oh, why didn't you say so before?"

"They didn't say because they're not sure. That's why," Marryatt said. "And I don't accept that evidence. I don't accept this reported conversation."

Lewis looked at him speculatively, searching for a vulnerable point.

"You accepted the evidence of reported conversation when it established the fact that Maurice Reid flew in the airplane. When it established a point that it was in your own interests to accept."

Marryatt was standing up now. His strong, challenging face dominated the room.

"Then I was wrong. But my views, right or wrong, are of no importance," he said, while the intensity of his belief in himself radiated from his face like an almost visible force. "I don't accept the fact that this Harry, who had no money, should get hold of fifteen pounds, spend it on buying a passage to Ireland, and then abandon the idea of flying and say good-by to the only fifteen pounds he had in the world."

"Why are you so anxious Harry should be dead?" Hester asked angrily.

He glared at her. "Because I want this matter cleared up. And no one can tell me that any court will accept the mixture of parables that's been brought up here."

Inspector Lewis heaved himself up and gathered the sergeant in with his glance.

"We must go," he said, "I am

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very grateful for the help you have all so freely given. You are right, you know, Mr. Marryatt, but this matter isn't going to court as it stands. There is no criminal case to bring forward. There will eventually be an inquest. All we have been trying to do here is discover in a friendly way what kind of proof of identity might be offered at the inquest. Also, if one of those four men didn't fly in that airplane, it's obvious that he must be somewhere else. It's easier to look for one man than four, and what has happened here has been quite enough to convince me that Harry Walters is the man to look for. I think we'll find him," he said significantly. "Where are you going to be for the next few days, Mr. Marryatt?"

"I'll stay at the Running Fox," Marryatt said, looking at Hester, who was absorbed in some private calculation and scarcely seemed to hear him.

"Then good-by for the present. If you happen to see Jackie, don't forget we'd like to get in touch with him."

They went, and a few minutes later Prudence had the great pleasure of showing Marryatt out.

PROOF

For the first part of the night Hester allowed herself to think of Harry, to recreate his face and remember the few words of love he had spoken, to dream of the plans she had made to save him and believe again in his genius. She struggled with unreality, desperately injecting life into it, and won a guilty victory. She offered herself to his memory, and fell asleep believing she would dream of him.

She woke early in the morning and forced herself to rise and dress, to think of her father and her sister, and of the fact that they needed her. She thought bitterly that she no longer needed them. The last few days had forced her into an existence that was quite apart from theirs; she had her private life, her secret thoughts, she couldn't relapse into being a member of her father's house. She would live alone forever.

She went downstairs and found Prudence in the kitchen.

"Hello," Prudence said. "I thought if I peeled the potatoes now you wouldn't mind if I went swimming."

"Swimming!" Hester repeated. "Oh, I'm very glad that you are able to enjoy yourself again. You're not worried about what people will think?"

"Don't say people when you mean you," Prudence advised. She threw the potatoes into the sink, viciously, as though she wanted to knock the bottom out of it. "We can't let this go on forever, that's what I think. Why

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shouldn't we just behave? Let's get some pleasure before the summer's over. If Father didn't stop that check I'll probably have to go and be a kitchen girl among the cockroaches in some ramshackle hotel."

"He sent a wire last night. He won't know till this evening or tomorrow if the check has been paid in already. It's more than likely that it has—in that letter Maurice gave Uncle Joe to post. Now, Prudence, could we stop talking, just stop talking for the rest of the day? Go swimming. Do what you want. But whatever you do don't go on talking forever and ever and ever like this, making me think of everything all over again."

Prudence looked at her angrily; than, in compunction, looked away again. "Don't worry, Hester," she said awkwardly. "I'll take the tea up to Father. You wouldn't like to come swimming?"

Hester shook her head. She sat, drinking hot tea, considering with dull surprise the death of her emotions. She went out of the house and into the garden, hurrying past the bed where the roses grew. It was less than a week since Harry had cut the rosebuds for her, one for every year of her life. She went into the woods and slowly toward the chapel. She sat down on one of the ruined walls, remembering the hour she had spent there with Harry, probing the wound, trying to make it hurt again.

When she heard a step she looked up, half afraid that Harry had come back.

It was Marryatt.

"Hello," he said. "I've been looking for this place. And I wanted to talk to you again."

She nodded mutely. She didn't want to talk. She had no energy to tell him to go away.

He sat down in the corner where the two broken walls met, lit a cigarette, and smoked it in silence. She looked at him once or twice, impatiently.

"You wanted to say something?" she asked.

"No, not now."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Just accustoming you to my presence. . . ."

"Then I'll go."

"No, please. We needn't talk. I won't worry you at all."

She sat down again. She was too tired to force herself to any kind of action. She drifted slowly into a waking dream of the past. Marryatt was part of it. His presence in the corner was neither remembered nor forgotten, until he stirred and she looked round to see an increased intensity on his face. He was staring across into the far corner of the chapel, and she looked too, and saw the blue paper carton lying there.

"So this is where Harry ate his lunch," she said. "It doesn't matter, does it?"

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"Not if he liked this place," Marryatt said, still looking intently at the blue paper. "Did he?"

"Oh, he might have liked it," she said angrily.

"And Morgan liked it too? This is where your sister saw Harry and Morgan quarrel, isn't it?"

"Questions again," she said wearily.

He walked over to the blue paper, looked down at it, bent, and touched it. He pulled one corner of it gently, but it was imprisoned between two stones.

He stood up again, looking dubiously at Hester, not certain how much she should be asked to hear.

She walked across to him.

"So someone's raised the stone," she said. "Don't look like that. You needn't look like that. It doesn't mean anything. If you think it does, lift the stone yourself. Go on. Lift it. I've more right than you to see."

"We'll go back to your house," he said quickly. "You'll come with me, won't you?"

She let him take her by the arm. She didn't listen to anything he said, as they walked back through the woods, but when they reached the house she shook free from him.

"There's the telephone," she said bitterly. She began to walk upstairs, but on the landing she stopped and listened long enough to hear what he had to say to the police. Then she went in her bedroom and locked the door.

When the police came and raised the stone and descended into the six-foot deep vault, they found all that was left of Harry. He had been shot in the chest, and one hand still lay protectively over the wound.

At first they thought there was nothing in the vault but Harry and the decaying wooden coffins. When they raised him they found a few scattered flower petals; colorless, shriveled nearly to the heart, but still with a vestige of the soft bloom of the living rose.

They searched the vault, but nowhere in the disturbed dust was any proof that the Sackford diamonds had ever lain there.

Inspector Lewis, confronted with murder instead of an irritating problem about missing persons, looked like a marble statue of himself. If he had any feeling of indulgence or sympathy for interfering civilians, he calcified it instantly. He had made it known he wanted to see Hester, and he waited for Hester to be produced.

"I'm sorry," Marryatt said. "You can't see her. She's not feeling like that."

Lewis looked at Marryatt as though he were measuring him for the gallows.

"I don't accept your authority," Lewis snapped. "I'm prepared to see you later, but not now."

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"Oh, come," Marryatt said gently. "I'm the man who put you on to this. I knew there was something about that chapel. I guessed things might have worked out that way."

"What way?"

"I thought maybe Morgan might have won the battle with Harry."

"So that's your opinion. Morgan. I might have supposed you'd jump to the easy conclusion."

Marryatt's manner of careless arrogance didn't change. "He was the man who'd hidden the diamonds. He was the man who went to the chapel on Thursday morning, quarreled with Harry, threatened him. Harry brought out the gun then: he knew about the gun. He was the man who was in such a state of despair on Friday morning that he frightened even Prudence. He told her, didn't he, that the plane was his only chance?"

"Mr. Marryatt, I can do my own guessing. Your views are of no importance. You hadn't even met Morgan Price."

"I'm asking you to get this straight before you see Miss Wade, or her father. They've had enough. They've lived a sheltered life for five hundred years. Now, you listen to me. As I see it, Morgan, who'd been dithering about all night, finally came down, to this room, and found the gun lying on the table where I left it. Then he went out, found Harry in the vault, and shot him."

"Throwing a rose on the body for remembrance?" Lewis suggested coldly. "Thank you, Mr. Marryatt. Now I want to see Miss Wade."

Marryatt, scowling, sat down on the arm of a chair. "I have no way of stopping you."

"It won't be necessary for you to be present, Mr. Marryatt. You may wait in another room, if you wish."

Marryatt's wishes showed clearly enough in his face, but he stood up and walked out of the room.

He met Hester in the hall.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I couldn't stop it."

She passed him without listening, and went into the room where the police waited. She sat down, ignoring them entirely, maintaining the appearance of a woman who had her own reality, and would admit no other.

"Miss Wade, I've asked you to come because you are the only person concerned who can be relied on to tell us what we want to know."

She nodded, still examining her own thoughts, not interested in the police and their questions.

"Was Morgan Price wearing a rose in his buttonhole that Thursday night?"

"No."

"Could you think carefully about that?"

She closed her eyes, calling up a vision of Morgan's tortured face.

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"No, he wasn't wearing a rose."

"Was he the kind of man who would wear a buttonhole? Had he ever, to your knowledge, worn one?"

"Never."

"Was Harry wearing a buttonhole that night?"

Her face twitched a little at the mention of Harry's name.

"No. But you had better ask Mrs. Ferguson, hadn't you?" she said with sudden passion. "He saw her last, didn't he?"

"And your father didn't wear a buttonhole? No, I thought not. Now Maurice Reid wore the rose you gave him in the morning in the garden, when you appealed to him not to take your father's money. He was still wearing it, when you left him here, in this room, late on Thursday night. You said so, didn't you?"

"Yes, he was still wearing it."

"And there was this scene in this room here, when Harry pinned the roses on Jackie's shirt?"

"Yes, I remember that," she said, her voice quivering. "Please, need we go on?"

"I'm afraid we must. Three people, Joseph Ferguson, Maurice Reid, and this Jackie, all wore roses that night." He made the statement flatly. "This Marryatt, what about him?"

Hester looked up. "Marryatt? I can't remember. I don't think so, but I can't remember. What are you trying to find out? What have roses got to do with this?"

"There were petals, quite a lot of petals, in the vault," Inspector Lewis said harshly. "I want you to try to remember if Marryatt wore a rose."

"I've had enough of this," Hester said on a note of repugnance. "I can't go on. Why should Marryatt wear a rose, just to oblige you in your search for a victim? You sit there, destroying us all, because you want to have your case tidied up, and put away in a box file. I didn't know the police were like this! And you," she said, turning to Sergeant Young, "pretending to be a pianist, to like Bach, to be a human being like everyone else. It's a lie."

"Please keep calm, Miss Wade. That's all we wish to ask you. Your sister has supplied the rest of the evidence. I'm afraid it may be necessary to see her again and to take a statement from her. If she confirms what she has already told us," he added in a kinder voice, "the case will be settled, beyond any reasonable doubt."

Prudence came in. Her hair was still wet from swimming, and there were two damp channels on her cheeks. She looked in terror, not at the detectives, but at her sister.

"Oh, Hester, I'm sorry I said all those things. I liked him so much. I did, truly. I'm so sorry. What can I do?"

Hester walked quickly over to

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the table where the roses languished, and stood, fingering the fallen petals, picking them up one by one, crushing them, until her fingers were wet.

"There's nothing you can do," she said, still standing with her back to the room. "Tell them what they want to know."

"We want you to describe, in your own words, what this man Jackie, Jackie Daw, if that's what he called himself, looked like when you saw him on Friday morning. I want you to think very carefully, because your words may be used as evidence. In fact, we want to take them down."

"All right," Prudence said. She looked guiltily at Hester's back. "I didn't see Jackie on Friday morning when I went into the kitchen. So I came in here, to the sitting room, and he was sort of standing around, with a duster. He was wearing that dreadful flowered shirt. I don't know if you heard about it before, but it looked as though he'd bought it at a jumble sale on the Gold Coast. It was all colors of flowers, and he still had two rosebuds pinned in it, that Harry put in the night before. You know. And he was looking kind of pale and underfed, the way he always did. I don't know about his trousers. I don't remember what they look like. Then I saw him again at breakfast, and he said—"

"Confine yourself to what you saw," Inspector Lewis interrupted.

"Then that's practically nothing. No, wait, I saw him take off the roses and throw them in the wastepaper basket. They are probably still there, because I haven't emptied it. And I saw him go away. He was wearing his pullover then, and carrying a paper shopping bag. I thought he was going to the village, but of course he must have been going away with his things."

"But he didn't have any things," Sergeant Young pointed out quickly. He looked down again at his notebook. "Shall I go back to the station and get this transcribed, sir?"

"No, copy it now."

While Sergeant Young wrote the statement, Lewis went to the wastepaper basket and shook out its contents. The two withered roses lay among the old papers and empty cigarette packets. He picked them up and put them away carefully, and then waited until the sergeant had handed over the statement and Prudence had signed it. He took the statement and folded it slowly, almost lovingly, as a hunter might unconsciously caress his gun.

"Then?" Hester asked.

He turned on her, smiling almost indulgently. He was a human being again. "Miss Wade, you look tired," he said in solicitous tones that, after what had gone before, failed to convince. "We

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needn't trouble you any more today."

"You can't go like this. We are the people most concerned. Perhaps we are the only people who care at all about him. You can't leave us like this, not knowing."

Inspector Lewis allowed his expression to slip almost to the edge of compassion, to the slopes that are too dangerous for officialdom to tread.

"I'm issuing a warrant for Jackie's arrest," he said. "I wish I could be sure about his other name being Daw."

The rose petals that Hester still held floated softly to the ground and settled there before she spoke.

"But he—we've sworn that he still had his roses in the morning."

"That's almost the whole point, Miss Wade. He had his roses in the morning, although we think he left them, or most of them, in that vault. We shan't know exactly what happened there, until we get him. There may have been a struggle. Enough of a struggle, anyway, to make someone's buttonhole, or the petals from it, fall off. He wouldn't have noticed at the time that they'd gone, but he certainly noticed it afterward. He wouldn't want to go back there, searching for rose petals."

"But how do you know it was Jackie?" Prudence said in exasperation. "He wasn't the only one with a buttonhole."

"The others were wearing only one rose. And, you see, you have the evidence in this room that it was Jackie. There are only sixteen roses in that vase, as Sergeant Young noticed earlier," he said in a voice which contained only a careful measure of approval.

The sergeant moved forward eagerly. "There were twenty, Miss Wade. You—he—I mean you watched them being picked, one for every year of your life, he said. And you noticed when he gave Jackie two of them. Eighteen left. No one else touched them, so far as you know. In the morning Jackie stayed long enough to flaunt the fact that he still had two roses. He was shrewd enough, in his way, but quite blinded by his own shrewdness, or he'd have taken his substitute roses from the garden, and not left the vase here with only sixteen."

Inspector Lewis sat still, looking as though he would like to bite his fingernails. "That's enough," he said impatiently. "There are no more facts we can give you. Only theories. It's possible that Harry found the place where Morgan Price was hiding those jewels he may have stolen. It's possible he went there late at night with the idea of getting these jewels and delivering them up to the insurance company. It's possible that this Jackie, quite independently spying on Morgan Price, also discovered the hiding place. The brooch he produced earlier in the evening

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certainly suggests this. It's possible that when Jackie had made his plans he went back to this vault and found Harry there already. All that will have to wait till we get him. It won't take long. We get a lot of co-operation when we need it. The first of the Sackford diamonds that comes on that market will be the end of your Jackie."

He began to make ponderous preparations for departure. Sergeant Young looked wistfully at the two silent girls, as though they represented something he had given up, like the piano, but, whatever he felt, he attached himself hastily to his superior, like a railway carriage to its engine.

Inspector Lewis stopped at the door.

"There's a point about a letter, the letter Maurice Reid gave Ferguson to post. He must have forgotten it. He gave it to the—to Harry Walters to post, or so it seems, for it was still in his pocket. There's no danger now that the check will ever be presented."

He gave them a bureaucratic nod that included in its scope a contempt for the fallible men who forget to post letters. Then he lumbered from the room. Sergeant Young followed, smiling anxious messages over his shoulder.

The two sisters were left alone to survey the empty wastes of misery. Prudence made an effort to approach Hester, then retreated, frightened by the silence.

They were sitting nervously apart when the door opened and Marryatt came in with two cups in his hands.

"Tea's up," he said. "It's strong, the way we like it in Australia. You'll get used to it."

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It was in his grasp—power, fame, and all that goes with it. All he had to do was bring it to a jury, he had all the facts he needed. But fate in the form of a hurtling mass of flames intervened. . .

THE DA'S REPUTATION

by JOSEPH R. MARSHALL

"IT WAS A MURDER," HE SAID. "It was the only murder I ever let go by without prosecuting." He puffed and took the pipe out of his mouth and looked at me in the darkness.

He said, "It looked like an accident, a perfectly plausible accident. Pray God you never have one like it."

I listened to the night summer sounds and the bullfrogs across the lake, and I didn't have to pray. The old fool would answer all my prayers if he'd just keep talking.

No more petty larceny cases and drunks and small time thieves. No more small-town politics and small-town living. I'd bring him in alone, try him alone, convict him alone. The story would make every front page in the state, and at twenty-eight I'd have a reputation nothing could stop. I could run for anything—congress, senate, governor.

I said, "You never can tell about human beings."

"You shouldn't worry about it, Charles," he said. "You're still a young fellow and every DA has let some cases go by if he's been in office a few years."

"I'm not going to let any big ones go by. It's the big ones that earn you a reputation."

"I was that way once," he said, "but you'll relax."

I waited a minute and then I said, "How does it feel to be retired?"

"It feels good," he said. "You look out there and maybe you can see the island. There's good bass in the weeds just off the island, but you have to put your plug right in between the lily pads. I'm getting pretty good at it. I get up in the morning and lately all I have for breakfast is an apple and a smoke, and I row over when there's still mist on the water. This past week I've come back with bass for breakfast every time."

He got up and emptied his pipe on the porch railing.

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I said, "It must get lonely out here alone."

"You mean Marjorie," he said. "Maybe I'll get lonely in a while but I'm a little old to be thinking of getting married again."

"She was quite a woman," I said.

"You can never tell about a woman," he said. He looked at my face and he smiled. "All right, Charles," he said, "you have figured it out, haven't you?"

"About Marjorie and Lawton?"

He nodded. "I thought you might be checking into that soon after I retired. Well, you're right, Charles. She killed Bill Lawton. It wasn't accidental, and that's why you wanted to come up here for the night, wasn't it?"

I flattered him a little. "You're still too damn smart," I said.

He was smiling. The moonlight showed the fat features of his face and the thick white mustache. He was relaxed and confident. He hadn't shaved in a couple of days and he was wearing an old sport shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His belly hung out over the belt on his pants. He didn't have a gun on his person and the nearest one was probably in a drawer inside.

"The case always did seem strange," I said. "It was just a hunch but Lawton's death didn't seem accidental."

"How many times did I tell you to play hunches," he said. "You keep on taking my advice and you'll make a good DA." He pulled his tobacco pouch from his shirt pocket and began refilling his pipe.

"I was going back through the files," I said. "I wanted to get a better idea of how you operated."

"And you wanted to look up Bill Lawton's death."

"I wasn't looking just for that."

He said, "There's no way to reopen the case, and Marjorie suffered more than she would have suffered in jail. You see, Charles, the last thing in the world she wanted to do was to kill him."

I pretended surprise. "You mean she didn't want to kill him? I don't understand."

He finished stuffing the tobacco in his pipe and lit it and puffed hard to get it going. The tobacco smelled rich in the night air. "I ran a good office," he said. "We never had even a taint of corruption, and I guess I have as fine a reputation as any district attorney ever had in this state. I'm proud of it, but I couldn't prosecute my own wife."

I flattered him again. "You've got a tough reputation to follow."

"You're the only man I could trust in the office, Charles, the only one I could depend on."

I didn't say anything. He said, "But you should know about Marjorie because she undoubtedly will try to tell you all kinds of lies.

"She didn't want to kill him, far from it. She and Lawton planned

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to kill me. Pray God it never happens to you, Charles, you love somebody, you trust them, believe in them, and it's pretty hard when they lie to you, even hate you. I suppose they thought they were in love, and she knew I'd never give her a divorce. I always carried a lot of insurance and Lawton would never earn a decent living."

He was leaning forward in the chair, holding his pipe in one hand and staring out into the darkness. I said sympathetically, "Maybe you shouldn't tell me."

"No," he said. "You should have all the facts in case she comes back."

I said, "She is back. She came into town yesterday."

He was silent for a few seconds. "That's what I thought," he said. "I knew she'd be back after I resigned."

"She came up to the office and she's been telling me things."

"A lot of lies," he said. "I guess she can't tell the truth any more. She and Lawton were running around together, lovers, for a long while and nobody knew it." He smiled and shook his head. "I should have guessed it when I saw him here a couple of times, but his folks had a place at the other end of the lake and it seemed natural for him to row over once in a while. When I bought this end of the lake, there wasn't any road. The road in from the highway only came halfway in to the dump.

"Folks used to drive in and back their trucks right up to the edge and toss the stuff over the cliff. After we bought the property, I had them bulldoze a dirt lane in to this end of the lake.

"There's a lot of turns in the road, and if you're coming in from the highway and you forget to bear left at the junction, you can drive right off the cliff. If you're going out of here too fast and you forget to bear right, you can drive off the cliff too. As soon as we put in the lane, I had a big arrow put up where the roads come together so that people wouldn't go the wrong way.

"That Friday it was raining hard, one of the spring rains. She called me at the office and asked me to hurry because she wasn't feeling well. I told her I couldn't leave before five, but I left early anyway, and I made pretty good time.

"Later I figured out what they'd done. They'd gone to the junction near the cliff and overturned the arrow so that it couldn't be seen. If you were coming fast and you weren't thinking, you could go the wrong way.

"I stopped at the roadhouse on the highway to call her and tell her I'd be in soon. They hadn't counted on my coming so early. He was at the cottage in his car, and he had to get out fast. The road is one lane all the way from the dump in, and he didn't want

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to run into me. He wasn't familiar with the road and must have been going fast. He forgot about the arrow being pulled down until it was too late, and he went over the cliff."

We were both quiet for a long while.

"It seems unbelievable he'd make a mistake like that," I said.

"I almost went over too," he said. "It was raining hard and I was driving fast. But I'd driven on that lane too many times. I stopped before I got to the cliff edge."

"He must have been going awfully fast to make a mistake like that," I said.

Gordon shrugged. There were only two lights burning far across the lake and the moonlight shone on the water. A little breeze had come up. It was rustling the trees.

"Gordon," I went on, "how long does it take to drive from the roadhouse to here at top speed."

"Ten minutes, maybe fifteen. It's only about six miles."

"On the way in tonight," I said, "I stopped at the roadhouse and had a beer. I drove in at about twenty miles an hour. It only took me eighteen minutes."

"That's about right."

"How long did it take that night from the time you called her until you got to the cottage?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes."

"No it wasn't, Gordon."

He shook his head slowly and smiled, a weary old man who had to put up with youth. "I thought she had been talking to you," he said, "but I never thought you would believe her. It's all lies, Charles, you know that."

"That won't do any good. I'm the DA now."

"What are you driving at?"

"You killed him."

He smiled easily and then he laughed. "Oh no, Charles," he said. "I thought you were smarter than that. You couldn't believe her and a story like that." He chuckled to himself and shook his head. "Come on," he said. "I'll get you a beer." He got up.

I said, "I mean it. I know the truth."

He stopped. "Don't be ridiculous," he said. "It's gone far enough for a joke."

"Marjorie swears you didn't get to the cottage until an hour after you called."

"That doesn't mean a thing."

"You found out he was her lover. You met him on the lane. You had a fight, put him in his own car and drove it off the cliff. You killed him, Gordon."

"Why you young idiot," he said. "I get you appointed DA just a few years out of law school and now you honestly believe you could prove such nonsense."

I had him worked up to the right point. I now told the lie that would catch him.

"I had the body dug up again.

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They didn't perform much of an autopsy the first time because his neck had been broken. This time they found out what really killed him. He died of a blow—a hammer, a monkey wrench, or a similar implement, because there was a dent in his skull. Marjorie claims she saw you examining the tool in the rain that same night. You were looking at it with a flashlight."

He was breathing heavily. "She put you up to it, didn't she?" He stepped closer to me. "Charles," he said, "don't try it. Forget the whole thing. You don't have to bring it up, and I'm warning you, if you do, you'll get hurt. You don't really know the first thing about trying a big case, not enough to be even an assistant DA. Don't let your luck go to your head."

I smiled at him. "You old fool," I said. "Why do you think I've been waiting and waiting. I knew all the time. I've been waiting for you to retire."

He stared at me and then he put his hands on my shoulders. He said slowly, evenly, "Waiting for what, Charles, to try a case you may not win, to prosecute an old friend for killing a man like Lawton, to ruin an old man for nothing? Let it be, Charles, let me suffer alone. At least leave me with my reputation."

"I'm not going to be a small town DA all my life. You thought I was stupid, young and stupid, but I knew what happened. Now I need a reputation and you're going to give it to me."

He moved faster than I thought an old man could. His hands shot out and slammed against my chest, and I stumbled back down the steps. I caught my balance and saw the screen door shutting behind him. He was running through the cottage.

I began to give chase. I yanked open the door and ran through the main room into the lighted kitchen. I heard a shot. I dropped to the floor onto my stomach. He was in the driveway and he had a gun. The old man hadn't forgotten how to shoot. I worked my way over to the wall, and reached up to turn out the light. As the light went out I crept quickly to the door and opened it slowly.

He was now in his car. His headlights flashed on, and the car accelerated down the lane. I leapt down the steps. He wouldn't get far. I'd stop at the roadhouse and call the state police and they'd pick him up within the hour.

I wouldn't bring him in alone but that was all right. That wasn't how I'd really make my reputation. All I was concerned with was the trial.

I drove fast on the bumpy road, between the trees and around the turns, and I caught a glimpse of his lights and then they disappeared.

There was a crash. I slowed down, and in front of me was the

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split in the lane, and the arrow sign that had been overturned. I took the left lane to the dump, and jammed on the brakes. I jumped out and ran to the edge. Far down the cliff side the car was burning, and in the light of its own orange flames I could see the wheels still turning and the trash all around it.

"You fool," I said. "You damned fool." My case, my trial, my reputation, all gone because the old idiot didn't remember to take the right turn. I'd be stuck in the county, a small-time DA for the rest of my life and I'd rot, like he had, trying drunken husbands for coming home and beating their drunken wives.

"You damned old fool," I yelled, and I saw the flames and then it came to me. Maybe the old fool made the wrong turn on purpose. Maybe he killed himself so he wouldn't have to stand trial. He died with his reputation and I would never get one. I heard my own voice cursing the dead like the voice of a madman.

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Jan Karic's rise to power was based largely on his eagerness to kill, a drive so blinding that his own wife no longer knew him. Yet, irony, in the form of a gift proved his undoing . . .

NINE ROSES FOR THE COMMISSAR

by OSCAR SCHISGALL

JAN KARIC'S SUDDEN RISE AND strange fall in the Communist Party began in November, 1956, at the time the Russian tanks moved into Hungary to crush the revolution.

Jan was on border patrol, shortly after midnight, when he heard the quiet splashings in the river. Instantly alert, he moved stealthily in the direction of the sound, followed by the four armed men of his patrol. He was breathless when he reached the riverbank—a huge figure with massive shoulders and an enormous, close-cropped head.

He saw the raft hardly thirty feet away, and his hand went to his holstered gun. In the moonlight he recognized the fugitives on those logs—the angular pharmacist, Anton Debroz, with his wife and their two children; and helping to pole the raft, Anton's younger brother, the schoolteacher, Stefan Debroz. As Stefan bent against the pole, his blond hair shone like a silver target.

Jan Karic bellowed to them to come back.

The Hungarian Revolution, so spectacularly successful in October, was doomed in November by the Russian tanks and soldiers pouring into the country. And thousands of people, like this Debroz family of Budapest, were trying to escape.

Jan Karic considered them fools. When he had been ordered to guard this wooded strip along the river he had told his patrol, "Let us begin by setting examples nobody will forget!" This kind of duty would give him a chance to demonstrate his zeal, and he welcomed it.

Now Karic once more yelled to the Debroz family and then drew his gun and aimed. The fact that these people were his neighbors, that the woman, Trudi Debroz, was a close friend of his own wife, could not be allowed to stop him.

At the sight of the raised weapon, Stefan Debroz dropped the

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pole and screamed, "Don't, Jan! For God's sake, don't! The children—"

But Jan Karic fired. His first bullet made Stefan Debroz stagger, a hand leaping to the side of his head, blood pouring between the fingers. He stumbled backwards and fell into the river.

Karic turned his weapon at the others. He did not need the help of his patrol. One by one he picked the fugitives off—father, mother, the two children—the shots punctuating their shrieks. By the time the raft ran aground on the opposite shore, it carried only the bodies of what had been a family . . . .

In the morning Jan Karic's patrol spread the news, speaking of their leader with awe. When Karic's wife, Maria, heard what had happened, she was unbelieving. She was left numb. Thereafter she seemed to live in a perpetual state of shock, moving about like an automaton. Sometimes she stared at her heavy-browed husband as she might have stared at a stranger.

"Enough of this acting!" he told her in disgust. "In a job like mine a man can't be soft."

She whispered, "But to shoot Trudi and Anton and Stefan Debroz and—"

"They were traitors! The Party will appreciate what I have done," he assured her. "You will see."

He was right. The ill-fated Revolution did not last long before the onrush of Soviet tanks, and once it was crushed it was found that more than forty fugitives had been killed in the sector guarded by Jan Karic. His reward was prompt and greater than he had expected. He was made a Deputy Chief of Police.

"This," he said in triumph to his wife, "is only the beginning!"

Then, on a Saturday afternoon when he had been Deputy Chief of Police for several weeks, Jan Karic came home to a surprise that should have been pleasant. Nine beautiful red roses sprouted out of a vase. They bore no card. When he asked about them, his wife, still living in a state of dazedness, said in a dull, disinterested voice that they had been delivered by old Czedik, the florist.

Since no one had ever before given Karic flowers, he sent for the old man. Czedik came on dragging feet. He was small, bent and saddened by all that had happened around him in the past months.

"I do not know who sent the roses," he said. "It was an order that came by cable from New York."

"There must be a mistake," Karic said. "I don't know anybody in New York."

Czedik shook his head. "The order said to deliver the roses to Jan Karic. How could there be a mistake?"

"Do you get orders like this often?"

"Often enough," Czedik said.

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"Usually for weddings or funerals or anniversaries—things like that. Flowers, you understand, are one of the few things that can be sent through the Iron Curtain. We florists have our organization—Interflora. It is international. We can cable orders for flowers to practically any country in the world."

Jan Karic listened to all this intently, but nothing the florist said explained the source of the gift. In the end he sent the old man away. Looking at the roses with uneasy eyes—for anything he could not understand left him troubled—he decided the best thing to do was to forget them.

But that was not easy, because a week later another bouquet arrived. This time there were eleven white dahlias.

Karic strode straight to the florist's shop and demanded to see the cabled order. It had been sent from Baltimore, and Czedik had told the truth. There was no sender's name; nothing but instructions to deliver 40 fleurins' worth of dahlias to Jan Karic.

"Fleurins?" he asked. "What are fleurins?"

"The money unit we use. It's international. Florists invented it."

Karic was more baffled than ever. Walking home, he wondered if he ought to report all this to the Chief of Police. But he did not want to attract the wrong kind of attention. A man who hoped to rise in the Party ought not to stir speculation among people who were always suspicious. He decided it was better to do nothing.

In the third week Czedik delivered seven lilies. This time Karic marched into the florist's shop and said in anger, "No more! I don't care what cabled orders you get—I don't want any more flowers!"

"As you like," Czedik answered with a sigh.

"Cable America and say I will refuse all future deliveries."

"To whom should I cable?" Czedik asked. "Every order comes from a different place, and there are eleven thousand Interflora members in America. Whom should I cable?"

Karic had no answer. He went away with a frustrated scowl.

For the next two weeks there were no deliveries at his home; but at the end of that time curiosity drove him back to Czedik's shop. "Any more?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, there have been two more cables," the florist said in a helpless way. "The first was for eleven tulips, the second for seven dahlias. But you told me not to deliver—"

"I cannot understand it!" Karic said. When he left he was oppressed by something intangible. His wife, who served him in silence these days, saw the dread in him and kept out of his way. For an hour after his lunch he strode back and forth, back and forth, glowering.

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He had hardly returned to Police Headquarters when he was summoned to the office of the Chief. There, to his bewilderment, he found a number of officials seated in a semicircle like judges. In the center of the group, distinguished by his enormous mustache, sat the Soviet Commissar himself. He wasted no time.

"Karic," he said, "if you have any explanations, make them now."

Jan Karic stared. "Explanations? Of what?"

"Let us not play games with each other. I am talking about your activities, your spying. This matter of the flowers—"

"I know nothing about them!" Karic cried, and now terror struck him. "I swear—*I swear!*"

"Spare us the lies," the Russian said. "Clearly the flowers are a cheap and clever way to send coded messages."

"No!" he shouted, his face now swollen. "I swear before heaven—"

"Do you take us for fools?" the Russian said. "If a friend had sent the flowers there would have been a name, a message. It is obvious that they represent a code by which you receive instructions. Roses mean one thing, dahlias another, lilies still another—and even the number of flowers must obviously have a meaning."

Shouting another denial, Karic started toward the circle of judges, but guards seized him. They could stop the wild wavings of his arms, but they could not end his splutterings.

"Stop this hysterical drivel," the Russian finally ordered. "You *should* have known we receive copies of all cablegrams. I ask you once more—who was it who sent the flowers?"

Jan Karic stood speechless before his judges, dripping sweat, groping for words where there were no words. He knew he was doomed by his inability to tell these men anything. He thought of sending for his wife, for Czedik. But what could they say? . . .

The Budapest papers carried only a brief story of Jan Karic's conviction and execution. Old Czedik, reading the news, sighed and shook his head and thought this would be the end of it. But two weeks later, to his surprise, he received another Interflora cablegram from America. This one directed him to deliver a dozen red roses to Jan Karic's grave.

Unlike the others, it bore a message. It said: "My last gift of flowers," and it was signed "Stefan Debroz."

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A coffin, an invalid, a snooping brother—these were the ingredients involved in Carl Somers' plans of murder. Even circumstance did its part to help. . .

TILL DEATH DO US PART

by ROBERT BLOCH

ARDENT FEMINISTS, forever bewailing the fact that it's a man's world, have thus far overlooked a telling example of injustice—it is usually easier for a husband to kill his wife than for a wife to dispose of her husband.

This is particularly true if the husband is fortunate enough to be a mortician by profession.

Carl Somers came to this conclusion one night in May, and by the end of June he was ready to put it to the test. He had his plans perfected and all he needed now was the proper opportunity.

Everything, he reasoned, was in his favor. His wife, Celia, was a semi-invalid who had made no friends in the community. There would be no embarrassing questions asked when he circulated the news that she had gone to Arizona for her health; in fact, several doctors had already urged her to do just that, and Carl had spread the word around.

After her supposed departure, he could fake some letter from her, if necessary, but there probably wouldn't be much talk. And by the time anyone might become suspicious, Carl himself would have disappeared.

He planned to sell the funeral home immediately and tell people he was joining Celia in Arizona. Oh, it would work out splendidly, and he knew in detail just what he intended to do when the chance came.

There was only one fly in the ointment; a big, fat fly named Elmer. Elmer was Carl's brother, and a sanctimonious prig. He lived in another small community about twenty miles away, and the two of them met infrequently.

But Elmer knew that Carl had married Celia for her late father's mortuary establishment, and he didn't approve of this. He also knew that Carl liked to step out occasionally, and he didn't approve of that, either. In fact, he seemed to disapprove of everything not connected with his own preoccupation with the church choir.

Psalm-singing prig! When Carl thought about his brother and his

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possible suspicions, he hesitated. If anybody would ask the wrong questions, it would be that fool of an Elmer; he was always so critical, always so quick to note anything the least little bit out of line. The mere suggestion of impropriety was enough to set him off; a word from him at the wrong time might be just enough to start the authorities thinking—and what was worse, investigating. And therein lay the key to all Carl's plans; there must be no investigation.

So all through June Carl endured his wife's hypochondriacal complaints, dreamed of the freedom so tantalizingly offered and so tormentingly denied by his brother's possible interference.

And then Fate stepped in and provided him with an unexpected opportunity. For on the Fourth of July, Elmer's wife died.

It was a sudden heart attack, sustained after a picnic outing, and when Elmer came to Carl with the news, he was desolated. Carl pretended to share his brother's grief, but inwardly he was overjoyed. It wasn't likely, under the circumstances, that Elmer would be snooping around or asking questions. This would be the perfect setup for what he had in mind.

So Carl set the wheels in motion. He explained to his brother that Celia had just left for Arizona by train, in obedience to doctor's orders, over this past weekend. She had promised to write him as soon as she arrived at her hotel, but in the meantime it might be difficult to contact her en route so that she could return in time for the funeral. He'd wire her, of course, but he couldn't promise—

Elmer didn't seem interested. He was too distraught to do anything but nod. His own grief overwhelmed him; he asked Carl to handle all the funeral arrangements, and then broke down completely in the midst of choosing a coffin from Carl's simple stock.

In the end it was Carl who actually selected the casket for Elmer's wife, and that suited him perfectly. He picked a nice large one, and after Elmer departed, Carl went upstairs and told Celia about it.

"You see, it has to be big," he explained, "because you'll be buried in it, too."

Celia's only answer was a gurgle, for at that moment Carl thrust the knife into her neck.

It was rather a messy job, cleaning up the bathroom afterwards, but Carl didn't really mind. He'd done it so many times in his dreams that everything seemed quite routine to him now.

He dragged Celia's body downstairs and laid it out on a slab, next to that of his late sister-in-law. He did a nice job on Elmer's wife, and a conscientious one, us-

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ing the best materials and putting in the fancy smilers at the edges of her freshly-rouged lips. He wanted her to look good when the mourners came.

With Celia he contented himself with a routine embalming and didn't even bother with makeup. After all, nobody was going to see *her*. She would be out of sight, tucked away underneath the velvet lining of the casket, with Elmer's wife resting above her. Nobody would suspect her presence there in the chapel. Of course, when the time came for the ballbearers to carry the coffin out to the hearse they would find it a heavy burden —but it was a very large casket, and they weren't likely to complain.

They didn't.

Everything went off without a hitch, just as Carl had planned and hoped. The mourners came to the chapel the night before and paid their last respects; some of them noted that Celia was absent and it gave Carl the perfect opportunity to spread the story of her trip to Arizona.

During the funeral the next day, Carl had one or two bad moments as he sweated out the ceremony. His brother Elmer was a pillar of the church, and his pastor gave an unusually long and eloquent eulogy. Carl could hardly wait until the casket was closed. But the moment came at last, and he had Celia right where he wanted her. As he reflected that in another half hour she'd be buried, he could scarcely contain his elation.

Out at the cemetery, Carl thought the way his brother carried on was rather odd. At least he thought it was odd, until he returned to the mortuary after the funeral and found the tall man waiting there.

"My name's Swanson," the tall man said. "Sheriff's office. I hate to disturb you at a time like this, but I'm afraid I must ask you a few questions. Do you know if your brother and his wife ever had any differences of opinion?"

"My brother? Differences?—"

"I'll be blunt," Swanson said. "There's talk going around that they'd been quarreling. It seems your brother got mixed up with some girl in the church choir. His wife found out about it. We know she threatened to go to the authorities. We also know that a pharmacist sold your brother some cyanide last week, before the picnic. . . ."

Carl began to tremble violently.

Swanson sighed and put his hand on Carl's shoulder. "Sorry to bother you," he said. "This must come as quite a shock, but sometimes one never knows what's going on, even with one's own brother. Of course there's one sure way of finding out. I've got the permit right here. We're going to dig up the grave and re-open the coffin . . ."

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As a member of the midnight profession of burglary, Franz struck with rapidity and precision. Nothing stood in his way, until one night a woman's sobs. . .

A SMALL FAVOR

by ARTHUR PORGES

WHEN FRANZ REALIZED THAT he was not alone in the house, his first impulse was to withdraw. Quiet burglary, not violence, was his forte; and to make matters worse, the other party was a woman. An hysterical housewife is never any help to a man in Franz' midnight profession.

As always, he had prepared a sure line of retreat. Although he had entered through a basement window, his first precaution, once inside the building, had been to unfasten, very stealthily, both front and rear doors. Thus, should any emergency arise, Franz could make a bolt for it in either direction.

But the whole situation was confusing. Franz knew that his brain was often muddled; that it didn't work as it had years ago in the little Bavarian town of his childhood. But even so, this woman was not supposed to be on the premises at all. A few days earlier the paper had reported that the family was leaving for Europe. It was quite a shock to find her at home, since Franz had hoped to ransack the place at his leisure.

He was just about to abandon the whole project as a bad job, when he heard the woman sobbing upstairs. It bothered him, that agonized weeping, bringing strong, unpleasant memories to his mind. Motivated by many obscure feelings, Franz crept up the winding stairs, and peeked into the bedroom. He did this by applying an eye very cautiously to the space just below one hinge of the door, which was almost closed.

She was lying on the bed, fully dressed, although it was near midnight. A small, rather round woman, of perhaps thirty-five. Even as he watched, she beat upon the pillow with soft, futile hands and exclaimed, "Oh, God—what can I do now! There's just no way out."

Franz was embarrassed. He usually regarded his wealthy victims as so many nameless moneybags. Robbing them was like bilking a soulless entity—say the transit company. No matter what you took, they had—or easily ac-

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quired—more. But here was a rich woman who seemed human and very unhappy.

Even as he pondered this matter, the extension phone rang, and she reached for it in convulsive haste. Franz listened shamelessly, wondering why her dark, tear-stained face hurt him inside.

"Yes," she was saying in a low voice. "I'm alone. I let the family go first. I have the money, but how can I possibly explain about my jewels if they—yes, $5,000 in small bills, mostly fifties, just as you said. But please, couldn't you—?"

Whatever plea she had hoped to make remained incomplete, withered by some statement from the other end of the line. Franz recognized the despair in her tones as she said dully: "All right. I'll bring it now. Of course, I'll be alone. Where this time? The old barn on Highway 43, just north of Brinton. Yes, I know the place. I'll leave at once."

Instantly Franz was scuttling downstairs, his rubber soled shoes noiseless on the heavy carpeting. His own car was parked a short distance away, and he meant to tag along. That he was losing a fine chance to loot the house carried no weight with him now. The woman made his muddled brain churn with queer emotions from the past, feelings that were dredged up from levels seldom disturbed these days. Somebody else, also plump, dark, and too often in tears, came to mind. Franz thought of her as he sent his old car racing down the highway behind the woman's sleek import.

Gradually he lessened the distance between them, and noting that she was inclined to dawdle, Franz concluded that it would be better tactics, in any case, to arrive first at the rendezvous, and with luck ahead of the blackmailer, too.

When he reached the old barn, he kept right on for perhaps three hundred yards, pulled off the road, and with unerring steps worked his way back to the meeting place. His old skill as a gamekeeper was still there, for he crept up to the barn without making a leaf rustle. And even in the bright moonlight, it would have taken a keen eye to follow his movements.

A few moments' competent and silent reconnaisance convinced him that he was first on the scene, and Franz settled down behind a well placed bush to await events.

Scarcely had he made himself comfortable, when the blackmailer appeared on foot, having also left his car elsewhere. He made a brief, stumbling inspection of the area that brought a sneer from Franz, snugly concealed. The man's lumbering steps would have alerted any real woodsman a hundred yards off.

For a while the man paced im-

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patiently up and down, lighting one cigarette after another, and swearing now and then in an undertone. One of his stubs actually bounced off Franz' cropped head, but he didn't stir. Finally the blackmailer stiffened and stood at gaze as the thrumming of a distant car increased in volume. "About time," he muttered, flattening himself against the barn.

The big car rolled to a stop, and Franz could see the woman get out, her whole attitude one of reluctance. Satisfied that she was alone, the man went to meet her, and Franz, moving like a shadow, followed within easy earshot.

"You didn't hurry any," the blackmailer snapped.

"I'm too nervous to drive fast," she said in a shaky voice. "I didn't dare. I couldn't. Not tonight."

"You brought the money?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes." And then with a pathetically feeble attempt at firmness, "but it must be positively the last payment. My jewelry is gone, and I simply can't raise another penny without getting caught."

"Too bad," he said, blandly malicious. "I'll have to tap your husband from now on." He caught her little gasp, and snickered unpleasantly.

"But you promised—"

"Of course. But you just said you would stop paying, and that releases me from any part of the bargain. Besides, I promised just to keep you from unnecessary worrying. Really, it was a favor." He paused to peer at her cynically in the moonlight. "Pity you're not my type, or something could be arranged. *I'm* not full of prejudice. If you were a few years younger . . ."

Franz' heartbeat speeded up. There was a tone in the blackmailer's voice he had heard often before. Sometimes tenor; then again, bass. Even contralto. It was a note of pleasure; the purr of a cat with an injured mouse to play with. Franz fought an irrational urge to run, to cringe, to scream, to beg, to turn to wood and be as invulnerable to pain.

"You see," the man went on, choosing his words with obvious relish, like a ham actor on display, "what I'm selling is my silence. No letter, nothing in writing to change hands. Just a stray bit of knowledge that's my old age insurance. Since it's in my mind, I can't lose it or have it stolen. Pay me regularly, and nobody else in the world who cares needs ever to know. Especially your blue-blooded husband from dear old Vuhginny—"

"Please," she said faintly. "I'll try to make another payment next month."

"Do that little thing," he mocked her. "Or don't. It's all the same to me. Your husband would pay gladly. And now dear lady, you clear away from here first, so I can see

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you out of sight before I leave. You might get desperate enough to follow me some time, and I prefer not to take chances. Some of your family might revert to type and slice me up." He thrust the packet of bills into a coat pocket, and withdrew to the shadow of the barn. The woman stood there for a moment, as if paralyzed, then with slow, stumbling steps returned to her car. The blackmailer watched her, and as she drove away, began to walk at an angle towards the highway. He was humming a tune, and his stride was jaunty.

He had covered barely twenty yards when a sharp point pricked the back of his neck, and a strange voice said: "Put your hands behind your back—quick!" Frightened and bewildered, he hastily complied, and Franz methodically tied them with a piece of cord. "Now march! Over to that patch of moonlight. I want to see your face."

Moving awkwardly, the man did so, and Franz studied him gravely. It was a full face, jowly and pale, but quite respectable in appearance. Not at all the features of a desperate criminal. Not like Muller, for example, or the brutal Hartmann. More like the little clerk, Schick, who tortured the rabbits he poached, and later tortured humans.

"What do you want?" the blackmailer demanded sullenly. "Who the devil are you?"

"I heard your conversation with the gracious lady," Franz replied. He spoke very gently.

"Are you after a cut?"

"Why should I cut? I need only to take."

This was so obviously true that the other didn't reply.

"It seems you have a secret to sell," Franz said. "I like secrets. Tell me yours. A secret worth $5,000 a month is most unusual even in this so-rich country."

"So you know the arrangement." The blackmailer was bitter. "She sent you, that two-timing ——! And I thought she wouldn't tell anybody her precious secret. Well, it won't work. If you take back the money, I'll squeeze double out of her next time. Unless—" He broke off as a disturbing thought came to him. Fear was strong in his voice now. "You can't—she wouldn't let you—not Mrs. Cary. Killing me wouldn't do any good. It's all written down. I swear it. And with instructions in case of my death—"

"Stop these foolish lies," Franz interrupted contemptuously. "Tell me the big secret, the $5,000 secret."

"No," was the hoarse reply. "She never sent you. She wouldn't want anybody else to catch on. You're just trying to muscle in. Well, you can't pull that on me."

Franz' voice became cold and venomous. "You will tell me the truth—all of it."

"Like hell. This is *my* racket."

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Franz spoke almost in a whisper, as if reminiscing. "Fool! I've seen better men than you eaten alive by dogs while the band played pretty waltz music to drown their shreiks. I have tried to forget those times, but it is hard, and you remind me of *them*." The knife glinted in the moonlight as he moved forward, and the blackmailer seemed to shrink inside his clothes.

"Don't! Lay off. I'll tell you. Man I don't like knives."

"Talk, then, and no lies. I can smell a lie. For years I was with people who lied to live. There is nothing about lying I don't know. The lie with the mouth; the lie with the eye; the lie with the whole body."

The other's face was damp now, despite the cool night air, and his words came in a turgid stream.

"That woman—Mrs. Cary—she's married to a real high class guy from Virginia. He thinks she's an orphan, but her mother was one of the biggest madams in New Jersey. I found it out just by luck; the old lady covered her tracks pretty slick, sending the kid to a fancy Connecticut finishing school and all. She's dead now, and the other relatives would never spill the beans, but Mrs. Cary knows what a good private eye could come up with if somebody pointed him in the right direction. There's a birth certificate, and hospital records, census—plenty to go on. If her husband ever found out, it'd raise merry hell with both of them. His family back in Virginia would have kittens! There's money in it—a mint. I'll cut you in, but let's don't spoil the racket, huh?"

"I don't understand," Franz said humbly. "What is a 'madam,' and why is Mrs. Cary to blame for her mother?"

"Man, you are square!" the blackmailer groaned. He made a hasty explanation, and Franz began to shake in turn. "To Cary and his crowd, a person's ancestry is the works—that bunch goes back to the Revolution. Bad enough his picking an orphan, but when she turns out to have a madam for her ma—bro-ther!"

There was a moment's pregnant silence as Franz' thoughts went back through the years to Berlin.

"I must tell you something now," Franz breathed. "About how they warned my father he was married to a woman of inferior race. He let them take my mother; he was a coward and a pig. My brothers and sisters were too young to know, but I was fourteen, and when I learned what they did to her—" His voice became almost inaudible. "A little, frightened woman, dark and gentle—so very gentle."

"Look, take the damn money and let me get out of here," the blackmailer said. "I'll lay off her if that's the way you want it."

Suddenly he jerked his arms

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powerfully, and his hands were free of the cord. He lunged forward desperately, and his shoulder struck Franz a numbing blow.

When he returned to the big house, it was six in the morning, and sunny. Franz rang the bell, and when the woman appeared at the door, showing all the signs of a sleepless night, he handed her the package.

"For you," he said. "A man gave it to me and told me to tell you—yes, he told me to tell you that your secret was safe, that he wouldn't ever say another word."

She recognized the wrapping, and her eyes widened incredulously.

"You mean?— B-But; I—" She broke off in horror as she saw his hands, so terribly blistered and torn.

Franz sheepishly put them behind his back.

"Oh," he smiled, "I had to dig—without tools; just a fence stake, and my flesh is much too soft these days."

"Please come in, and let me bandage them. It's the least I can do."

Franz shrugged. "If you like," he said. "It was only a small favor I did you."

She thought he meant delivering the package, but Franz was thinking of a different chore altogether.

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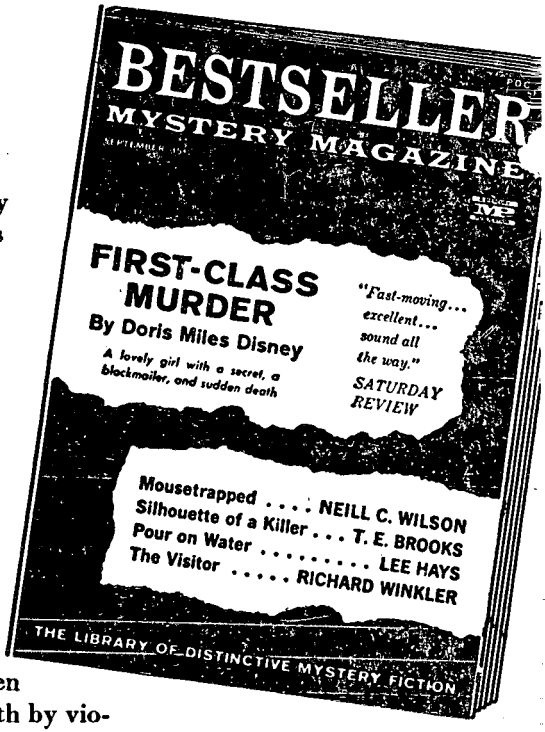
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